

The Interview with PROBE Magazine

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, in an exclusive interview with PROBE, talks of reforms, Jamaat's relationship with Awami League, with BNP, its role in 1971 and more...

What is your observation about the present circumstances in the country the anti-corruption drive, political reforms and the overall situation?

Our President declared the State of Emergency in the backdrop of adverse and difficult political circumstances. As a result, the election scheduled for January 22, 2007 was suspended. A new caretaker government was formed with a new Chief Advisor and new advisors. They took up the task to prepare the environment for a meaningful and credible election. The Election Commission has been reorganised. This is a good initiative and we appreciate it.

What about the reforms of the political parties?

It is politics that needs to be reformed. Simply changing a few leaders does not constitute political reforms. In an article of mine I raised certain questions for the political

leaders and the civil society to consider. I wrote a little on party politics, that there should be democracy within the parties, that dynastic politics should be stopped, leaders should be elected to their positions, decisions should be taken jointly and so on. As things stand in most parties, the party chief has the full authority to take decisions. This is not a good precedent and should be changed.

Some feel that the moves for reforms within the political parties are actually imposed. What is your opinion?

We prefer not to comment on any matter without absolutely authentic information, that is why I wouldn't want to say that the reforms are imposed. However, one doesn't exactly get the feeling of spontaneity in the reform moves. The inner conflicts and crisis, being created in the major political parties due to their initiatives for reforms, may simply serve to worsen the political crisis. This does not bode well.

Reforms should be initiated to create healthy politics, which is in a sick state at present. The method undertaken to create healthy politics should be healthy itself too. The political parties have to take initiative for political reforms. They have to come forward spontaneously. This calls for a meaningful dialogue between the government and representatives of the political parties. The government has to take initiative in this regard.

This is not just a matter of changing leaders. There is also the matter of inter-party relations. The political parties are

rivals to each other, but they shouldn't be regarded as enemies. A political rival will freely make their statements in public, present their programmes and their ideology. If I don't agree, I will voice my disagreement and offer arguments to support my case, but I won't exert force. However, in our country it has become a rule to use force. If a political party holds a rally, its rival political party will obstruct it. Such action leads to counter-action and violence. Muscle power has given place to black money in politics.

To overcome all this, the political parties must work for political coexistence. There must be mutual tolerance. This calls for dialogue. The political parties must come to an agreement for some sort of code of conduct.

In the move to establish democracy in the major political parties, top leaders like Begum Zia, Sheikh Hasina and Ershad are being pushed aside to give way to new leadership. You say that Jamaat-e-Islami doesn't need reforms, that it has democracy. So don't you think that it is time for you to step down from the top post of your party?

There are many significant issues involved in your question. I do not think Begum Khaleda Zia came on her own accord to politics. The party people brought her in. The same applies to Sheikh Hasina. She had been living abroad. When Awami League was on the verge of breaking up, Tofail Ahmed and Dr. Kamal Hossain proposed her name and brought her in. They have been far longer in the top posts of their parties than I have been. I have been in this post for two terms, three years each and now the third term is on. I did not ask for this responsibility. Even before the last election

approached the Majlis-e-Sura, saying I didn't want to remain in this post. When the next election of my party comes around I will again request the Sura to replace me. However, in our organisation just as one cannot ask for leadership, neither can one shirk the responsibility of leadership.

In Jamaat-e-Islami we practise democracy not in word alone, but in deed as well. Golam Azam was the leader. After him no one from his family took over the party's leadership, neither will anyone from my family take over after me. I do not believe in holding on to power for even one day extra. The party has a constitution. According to that, whoever the members wish to bestow leadership upon, will take the responsibility. There is not a single instance in Jamaat-e-Islami where the members of the Majlis-e-Sura have given the Ameer sole authority to take a decision after having failed to reach a unanimous decision through discussion. This doesn't happen here. We have discussions for hours on end until a unanimous decision is reached.

It isn't quite right to compare us with others. In the case of Ershad, his party was formed centred on him. He was there from the beginning. You can't compare me with him. I worked in this organisation as an ordinary worker. Then I had the responsibility of Dhaka City. Next I became Assistant Secretary General of the central working committee for six years. After serving for 12 years as the Secretary General, I was given responsibility as head of the party. This is my seventh year in this office.

Will the present wave of reforms affect you all too?

We are already following the norms which are being ushered in by the present wave of reforms. We have central elections every three years -- this is the election of the Ameer and the

Majlis-e-Sura. No matter what circumstances may prevail, our elections are held. Two elections have been held since I was given responsibility of the party in December 2001. Our district level organisations have elections every two years. At the local level, every year the election is held. All decisions are made through discussion. I said it before and I would like to stress it again, the Ameer does not have the sole authority to take decisions.

With this "minus-two" formula being implemented, do you apprehend being "minused" as well?

Analysts have said many things about minus and plus, but this is not the actual matter. Reforms are needed in certain basic matters. Reforms shouldn't centre on "minus" and "plus". As for me personally, I never hankered after leadership. I still have no cravings for holding on to leadership. If my organisation today says that I cannot remain leader, I shall welcome the decision. After all, I am no longer a young man and perhaps it is time for me to move on, although I must say that there are persons quite senior to me in politics. Those coming new into leadership in the other parties are not junior to me.

While leaders of other parties are being arrested for corruption and other charges, your party leaders remain free. There are objections as why you are not being arrested despite the cases against you. There is the case filed by CPB (The Case was filed by Workers Party not by CPB –The publisher) against you and the Secretary General in connection to the October 28 Paltan killing. The Secretary General faces extortion charges too.

Two cases of extortion were filed against the Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General, one in Daudkandi and one in Zakiganj. After police investigations, the final report was submitted saying that the charges were false. The matter ends there. As for the October 28 incident, the whole world knows what happened. Everyone knows who called for the people to march in the city armed with poles and oars. Who were the ones who beat people to death with the oars and poles and then danced on their dead bodies? The whole world is witness to what happened that day. We were the victims. It is a farce to name us as the accused in this case. It goes against all norms of justice. We are on bail in that case. Until the matter is settled, our bail remains in effect. So I do not see how there can be any objections to our not being arrested in that case. Then again a case was filed by a heroin addict regarding the August 21 incident. One can hardly attach any credence to this.

Awami League has demanded that religion-based politics like that of Jamaat-e-Islami must be banned in the future. They accused Jamaat of involveing in the August 21 grenade attack, of involveing in the rise of militancy and also in smuggling of arms and money. How would you respond to these allegations?

Awami League brought about these allegations as our political rivals. That does not mean that we have to these into consideration. When they first brought about charges and filed cases regarding the grenade attack, they never mentioned Jamaat-e-Islami. In fact for the past few years they didn't mention Jamaat in this connection at all. Then all of a sudden they use a heroin addict to file a case against us in this regard.

As for militancy, it is against Jamaat's political doctrine. Those who are involved in militancy in the name of Islam, consider Jamaat to be most harmful for them. They are most active against Jamaat. If they can manage to get a foothold in this country's politics, it is Jamaat that will be affected the most. So the question doesn't arise of Jamaat supporting them or promoting them. Jamaat is a political party which participates in the democratic process. It has always joined the movement for democracy. It practices democracy within the party itself. Jamaat has hundreds and hundreds of publications. No one can cite a single chapter or word from these publications which indicates that Jamaat incites militancy or shelters militants. This is just a false allegation to which we have given our reply in parliament. We have replied on the streets. We have replied at public rallies.

Awami League was in power twice. From 1972 to 1975 there was no one to challenge their power. At that time could they file a single case against Jamaat for communalism? At the peak of their power, they couldn't file a single case against Jamaat. Could they file cases of rape, murder or arson against Jamaat? Not a single one. When Major Rafiq was the Home Minister, a list of criminal godfathers was name of a single Jamaat member in that list. So the allegations they are bringing about now are simply to harass their political opponents. The only way they can do so is to use those cliché's which have lost meaning.

Awami League wants to prohibit religion-based politics. What does this mean? On one hand they are speaking against militancy; on the other hand, they want to ban the politics of the Islamic organisations which are involved in the democratic political process. By permanently banning religion-based democratic organisations, they are pushing them towards militancy. This is very short-sighted on their behalf. It cannot help in keeping Bangladesh free of militancy and terrorism.

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They also demand that war criminals be tried. Other quarters also make this demand. How do you view that?

Do you see yourself as a war criminal, that you may have to stand trial?

Who is a war criminal? Someone who takes part in a war and commits crime. We did not take part in war, so the question of us being war criminals doesn't arise. Awami League can hardly talk about trying war criminals after the fact that when they were in power, they sent 195 Pakistani military officers off to India without trying them here for war crimes. So it isn't befitting for them to call for the trial of war criminals. They couldn't even file a single criminal case against us when they were in power from 1972 to 1975. How can they think of trying us as war criminals?

Sheikh Mujib had issued a pardon in this regard.

Yes, he had declared a general amnesty. However, they claim that Jamaat doesn't fall under this general amnesty. The general amnesty was for political differences. Only a few specific criminal cases were not

under this general amnesty arson, loot, rape and murder. I have issued challenges repeatedly in the parliament to prove such charges against us. Awami League was given ample opportunity against Jamaat. When they held all power, there wouldn't have even been a single lawyer to stand in favour of Jamaat. But at that time they couldn't file a single criminal case against a single Jamaat leader, whether at the centre or at the district or field level.

Since they couldn't lodge any case against Jamaat, they are now manufacturing all sorts of allegations. We are people of this country. We work in the interests of the people of this country. If the people believed their allegations, we wouldn't be able to do politics here.

Some political analysts predicted that if Awami League had come to power this time, there would have been an alarming rise in militancy. As an experienced politician, what is your view on this matter? Do you see any such possibility?

I cannot tell the future. If there had been a possibility of Awami League winning the scheduled election, the election would have been held. Awami League's well-wishers at home and abroad would have worked in favour of Awami League. When it became apparent that Awami League wouldn't be winning the election, various obstacles were concocted to thwart the polls. As the elections were not held and they didn't come to power, it is irrelevant to make any hypothetical analysis of the matter.

Presently leaders are being arrested for crime and corruption during the rule of the four-party government. As an ally of the four-party alliance, doesn't Jamaat share in the responsibility for the corruption?

Corruption isn't decided upon in any cabinet meeting. No decision to carry out corruption is taken at any political forum. Corruption is carried out at a personal level. It is something not done in the open. When the overall blame falls on a government, we cannot move away as we are an ally. So if there have been political difficulties for this, we too have faced these difficulties. The entire nation has had to bear the brunt of this.

Your party has regular internal monitoring and is very conscious of what is going on within the party. So during the four-party rule, when your MPs were involved in corruption, why wasn't action taken against them?

If any member of the party does anything objectionable, this is raised at the monthly meeting of our executive council. If necessary, an inquiry is conducted into the matter and action is taken accordingly. This is a continuous process. Corruption charges had been raised against a certain Mizanur Rahman. He had been unwell the entire year and was ailing when certain irregularities took place. If information came to us timely, we could have dealt with the matter accordingly, but as he was unwell, the matter was taken up later. As for corruption charges against Nazrul Islam, nothing could be proven as yet. When Abdullah Taher was arrested, he hadn't been charged with corruption, but with toll collection in Adabor. There are a few other charges against him. Once the restriction on politics is lifted, we will look into how plausible these charges are legally. If any allegations arise against a leader of any level in our party, we immediately investigate the matter. We then take action in according to our constitution. This is our tradition.

We hope the best for our country's future. We have expressed our support for the present government's drive against corruption. We have also expressed our hope that the government takes care that no innocent person is harassed as a result of any What do you foresee about the future of our country?

We hope the best for our country's future. We have expressed our support for the present government's drive against corruption. We have also expressed our hope that the government takes care that no innocent person is harassed as a result of any propaganda from any quarter. After all, if the neutrality of this government is questioned, this may be harmful for the country. We hope that this government is successful. The military backs this government and the military is above partisan views. It is the symbol of national unity. They are the sentinels of independence and sovereignty. If the neutrality of the government backed by them is questioned, or if it fails, then there is nothing left. Uncertainty will loom large on the nation and we do not want

The government's initiatives deserve praise. We look for a positive and just outcome of the initiatives for reforms in the Election Commission, in the Anti-Corruption Commission and in the police and in the drive against corruption. However, ultimately an election must be held. The government is committed to this. All these activities aim at ensuring a credible and meaningful election. We have no objection to a justified amount of time being taken for such an election, but no one should want an unelected government to continue for an unspecified length of time.

Do you think they will be successful in holding the election in time?

I see no reason for them not to be successful if they have the sincere intention to do so. There are 17 months from now till December 2008, quite an adequate amount of time. All concerned must be very cautious that the election does not exceed this limit.

How do you view the new political party being formed?

Our country has democracy; it has multi-party politics. Any person or persons can take such an initiative at any time. If this new party can bring about a qualitative change to politics, this will add a new dimension to the country's politics. We wish them success.

Jamaat-e-Islami is financially strong in comparison to other parties and this is often talked about. What do you say about this?

This is just another ploy to hit out at Jamaat-e-Islami. What proof is there that Jamaat-e-Islami is a very financially strong party?

There is the Ibne Sina Trust and several other trusts, as well as Islami Bank, which are affiliated with Jamaat. This is a huge source of income for Jamaat.

Anyone can establish a welfare organisation or business organisation in this country. To associate all these with a political party is a very narrow-minded view. Jamaat-e-Islami has no connection whatsoever with Ibne Sina or Islami Bank. Advocate Mujibur Rahman for long was the Chairman of Ibne Sina Trust. He had been associated with Muslim League politics since his youth. How is that connected with Jamaat-e-Islami? Commodore Aatur Rahman was similarly with Ibne Sina Trust. He was a retired senior naval officer. How was he connected with Jamaat-e-Islami? There may be some Jamaat-e-Islami people there in the organisation. The profits of the trust are used for welfare purposes. No one can prove that Jamaat-e-Islami gets any financial benefit from there. There are intelligence agencies in the country. Could they ever come up with any information that these organisations run Jamaat-e-Islami or fund the party?

The founding Chairman of Islami Bank was Abdur Razzak Laskar. He was not involved with any political party. Lutfur Rahman Sarkar was the Managing Director of Islami Bank. He had been made We do not consider any political party as the enemy. They are our political rivals, opponents. We want to tackle them by proving our superiority in ideology and in our programmes through reasoning Governor of Bangladesh Bank during Awami League's rule. Had Lutfur Rahman Sarkar been a Jamaat man, would Awami League make him the Governor of Bangladesh Bank? They were definitely quite certain that Lutfur Rahman Sarkar had no links with Jamaat-e-Islami. Yet he was the MD of Islami Bank. These allegations are just a reflection of political bankruptcy of certain quarters.

Awami League launches a volley of propaganda against you, viewing you as the enemy. Do you view Awami League as your enemy? Again, just as you became allies of BNP, in future if Awami League invites you to join their alliance, will you do so? We do not consider any political party as the enemy. They are our political rivals, opponents. We want to tackle them by proving our superiority in ideology and in our

programmes through reasoning and intelligence. We formed an alliance with BNP as we shared certain ideological similarities. When Awami League went to power, it prohibited Islamic politics. It curtailed the growth of Islamic education and culture. But when the late President Ziaur Rahman came to power, he added the word 'Bismillah' to the Constitution. He replaced 'secularism' with 'faith in Allah'. That is why we felt an affinity with them and joined them in the alliance.

We even joined Awami League in the movement against military dictatorship, in order to restore democracy. This was when Ershad was in power. We were in the movement which was being carried out on one side by Awami League's 15-party alliance and on the other by BNP's seven-party alliance. We even fought with Awami League against BNP to have the caretaker provision added to the Constitution. The people are aware of this. So it is the political circumstances which determine whether or not to join hands with any quarter in an alliance.

Are you still a part of the BNP-led four-party alliance?

The state of emergency was declared while the four-party alliance was still intact. There has been no official announcement to dissolve the alliance.

The four-party alliance's programmes continued as long as indoor politics were allowed. At present we cannot say we are not in the alliance or that we are in the alliance. Once the restriction on indoor politics is lifted, we will take our next decision.

How do you view the two emerging groups in BNP -- one led by Begum Khaleda Zia and the other by the reformists under Mannan Bhuiyan? If Mannan Bhuiyan shortly declares a separate group, which side will you take? This is their internal affair. We do not want to poke our nose into any other party's internal affairs. It is for them to decide. Then, depending on the circumstances, we will take a realistic decision in the best interests of the country.

Many politicians are fearing arrest. What about you, do you apprehend arrest too?

I am at home, eating and sleeping. I see no reason to apprehend arrest. I hear so many rumours that I have already been arrested. But here I am, at home. I even get telephone calls asking me if I have been arrested! There are always such rumours concerning political leaders, but I have no apprehensions in this regard.

Jamaat-e-Islami sided with Pakistan in the War of Liberation. Now you are doing politics in Bangladesh, even forming part of the government. If for once you asked for pardon, the matter will be resolved. Why are you not doing so? Why is Jamaat stubborn on this head?

You will recall that Golam Azam had been imprisoned on the citizenship issue. Jamaat's leadership had been in his hands in 1971. After he was granted citizenship through the verdict of the Supreme Court, he delivered a speech at the northern gate of Baitul Mukarram mosque. In that speech he expressed regret for his role in 1971. He expressed his respect for the leaders of the independence war. He expressed his respect for the late leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for Moulana Bhasani, for General Osmani and for Ziaur Rahman. If an apology would solve all problems, then after that speech of Golam Azam, these issues shouldn't be lingering on even now.

Since these issues are lingering on, why don't you give a detailed statement in public to clear up the matter for once and for all?

We have given our explanation many times. It is simply because there is nothing else against Jamaat-e-Islami that this issue is being raised time and again.