Obituary essay: A pragmatic politician

SARFARAZ AHMED ARTICLE (January 07, 2013) : The words "former Amir of Jamaat" or a person having filled the leadership of Jamaat-e-Islami previously as an introduction of Qazi Hussain Ahmad, who was buried yesterday in his native village of Ziarat Kaka Sahib in Naushera district, always grudgingly sounded odd because of two broad reasons: not only had he headed region's one of the most important political parties having a strong religious base for over two decades, he refused to accept any low-key role, let alone retirement from politics, for himself. He remained passionately committed to his party ideals that he espoused zealously and vigorously but in a somewhat controversial manner. He was never removed or remote from his party workers or leadership even after his 22-year stint as successor of Mian Tufail Muhammad. Therefore, he would be regularly employed towards various tasks by Jamaat, which is headed by his successor Syed Munawwar Hasan. A rally led by him in tribal areas which came under a suicide attack a few months ago only reinforces the argument that the former Jamaat Amir was still a pressing need, if not a profound indispensable personality, for the party. A Pushtoon by ethnicity, Qazi is vastly credited for deepening the roots and expanding its base significantly in a province where whatever space left behind by parties such as Khudai Khidmatgar (now ANP) of Bacha Khan and JUI of Mufti Mahmood was grabbed by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's PPP and a new-look PML under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif. Qazi thus emerged as a strong voice in the Pushtoon society on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. A highly valuable product of University of Peshawar, Qazi was able to show better understanding and appreciation of political upheavals in neighbouring Afghanistan: coups and counter-coups, the Soviet invasion, an internecine civil war, Taliban's takeover and the US invasion had greatly shaped his worldview. The removal of the ZAB government by General Zia had almost coincided with the arrival of the Red Army in Afghanistan; it had also come as a golden opportunity for the general to perpetuate his rule. The evolving domestic and regional situation had turned the Jamaat into a notorious handmaiden of the general. Not only had it become a non-convenient scapegoat, but also an indispensable partner for the man in khaki. The Afghan conflict enabled Jamaat to enhance its visibility and expand its sphere of influence on an unprecedented scale; it earned global recognition and the reputation of a key player in a war-torn Afghanistan. It also earned Jamaat endearment or fondness of the US which lasted until terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001. A widely-traveled Qazi was an MSc in geography. It was a subject that enabled him to develop a deep understanding of diverse geographical, cultural, religious and political conditions around the world. He sought to achieve his party's goal towards renaissance of Islam with a new outlook and strategy. He is said to have memorized the entire work of Allama Iqbal in relation to significance of revival of the religion that originated from the Arabia in the 7th Century. His deep insights into the Afghan War had prepared him to take a bold decision that required him to underscore, eloquently and convincingly, the need for giving a new and pragmatic direction to a party founded by great Islamic scholar of world repute Maulana Maududi. He was perhaps of the view that the gains made by his party which had seen a period of blight and stagnation until the Afghan `Jehad' could only be protected and preserved through articulation of a "revolutionary" strategy. He knew well that such a goal could only be achieved through assuming the mantle of party leadership. His growing impatience towards becoming the Amir of Jamaat was the reason behind his strategy in the intra-party elections in 1987. It is a widely-held perception that Qazi formally launched a campaign for the top party office. His

action was unprecedented and shocking in the entire history of the party in which any overt or covert yearning for any office was considered a highly inappropriate act and hence a disqualification. But Qazi had taken a great risk; he is said to have personally canvassed for his candidature. He wrote letters to the arkaan (the category of members who vote), explaining how the party needed new ideas to achieve its goals in the shortest possible time. He was able to create an ideal pitch to sale his plan successfully. It was under his leadership that Jamaat witnessed a paradigm shift in its approach to politics. He was singularly responsible for expanding party's populist base across the country. It is, for example, said that the number of Jamaat arkaan who constitute a broad policymaking body had increased phenomenally in the federal capital alone before Qazi died. It is during his leadership that the communication/media strategy his party employed indicated a radical change in its approach. People still remember the graffiti of early 1990s through which he famously challenged the status quo. "Zalimoun, Qazi Aaraha Hay" was one such slogan which greatly attracted people's attention. Qazi played an important role in the formation of opposition alliances post-Zia period. He was a key driving force behind the religious parties' alliance which took part in the 2002 elections under the banner of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal. He was widely considered the most deserving candidate for the president-ship of that alliance which made highly significant gains in those elections, enabling it to form its government in the then NWFP, become a key coalition partner in the PML(Q)-led government in Balochistan and occupy the office of Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly. But a more astute, crafty, shrewd and smart but humble and kind politician Maulana Fazlur Rahman wouldn't take such a risk. So there emerged Allama Shah Ahmed Noorani as a `consensus' candidate for the MMA leadership. Jamaat under his leadership did not take part in the 2008 general elections. It is not known whether or not he ever regretted that decision. Later, his efforts to help revive the MMA which originally comprised, among others, JUI and his party, ahead of 2013 elections failed to reach fruition because of serious differences between JUI and Jamaat leaderships. His death on the eve of 2013 general elections is a great loss not only for his party, but all religious outfits in particular. The greatest thing that might have happened for him at the fag end of his life must be the historic victory of Jamaat's counterparts Akhwanul Muslimoon or the Muslim Brotherhood, a party founded by great Islamic scholar Hassan al Banna in 1928, in Egypt. This historic development in North Africa, the Middle East and the Islamic world must have provided an ailing but a workaholic Qazi with a reason to pursue his life-long ideals with a new determination and resolve. He will always be remembered for his tenacity, dynamism and the perspective from which he saw and interpreted the world. Without an iota of doubt, it was under his leadership that Jamaat's ideology was tempered with pragmatism. *(The writer is newspaper's News Editor. He previously worked for several publications, including Daily Times and Dawn, on different positions. Can be reached through news.editor@br-mail.com.)*

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