



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religious political parties and welfare work: Jama'at-i-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh

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Why do so many religious political parties have substantial welfare programmes? Is their welfare work merely a means of winning votes or does it serve other purposes?

An investigation of the welfare programmes of the Jama'at-i-Islami parties in Pakistan and Bangladesh shows that they

- are involved in a wide range of charitable, welfare and service provision activities, including health care and training, education, emergency relief, water supply and orphan support.
- charge a basic (below market rate) fee for the services they provide (except to those who cannot afford to pay), which users are prepared to pay because of the perceived good quality.
- are organized in very different ways for historical, political and practical reasons: in Pakistan the Jama'at has established its own network of specialized or multi-sectoral welfare and service delivery organizations, whereas in Bangladesh (where the Jama'at has periodically been restricted or banned) Jama'at members play key roles in the management of apparently independent organizations.
- demonstrate the parties' commitment to their religious ideology, especially social justice, which is seen as central to Islam.
- require a very organized party structure, meaning that not all religious parties are able to maintain large welfare programmes: only well-organized religious parties with substantial income from their members' donations and other religious sources are able to make such sustained investment. In Pakistan and Bangladesh none of the other Islamic parties are as large as the Jama'at and their welfare networks are less extensive.
- deliver their services through networks of voluntary organizations, which rely on managers who are party members and volunteers, rather than paid professionals.

The claim that political parties are 'membership groups' that compete with other membership groups for citizens' loyalty and resources is borne out by this study. Rather than providing forums for public deliberation on the full range of issues on the public agenda, the religious political parties' emphasis on creating a cadre of ideologically committed members supports the argument that they are driven primarily by their religious ideology. Their engagement in welfare programmes is regarded as critical to their identity as parties and for mobilizing party members; the possibility that welfare provision might win votes is a less important motivation.

The study shows that religious political parties are more complex organizations and have more complicated relationships with the state than is recognized by political theorists. Further research is needed to assess whether:

- they do in practice provide good quality, sustainable and appropriate services;
- the voting behaviour of beneficiaries of the welfare services they provide does in fact change.

Religious political parties or their associated organizations are potential development partners for governments and donors concerned to improve the delivery of welfare and services, because

- the parties have established networks of voluntary organizations
- their programmes may be more cost-effective than those of other non-state providers because of their reliance on committed party members and volunteers.

Based on Bano, Masooda (2009) *Marker of identity: religious political parties and welfare work — the case of Jama' at-i-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh*.

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