Awami League and Jamaat: Strange turns in the history of political alliances



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■ MOHIUDDIN AHMAD

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman recently advanced a striking allegation, claiming that Awami League, whose activities remain banned, and Jamaat-e-Islami, now leading the opposition, have entered into a covert understanding, united not by shared ideals but by a common political purpose. Speaking at a public gathering a few days ago, he asserted that intelligence reports indicated an emerging nexus between the two groups.

What lends particular force to the accusation is the historical irony it invokes. For decades, Awami League and Jamaat have represented opposing narratives of Bangladesh's national identity. Their deepest divide lies in the memory of 1971, the year of Bangladesh's birth. Yet Tarique Rahman argues that beneath this public hostility there has often existed a less visible history of accommodation. Whether this allegation reflects political reality or rhetoric remains a matter of debate. Importantly, reports carrying his remarks also note that these claims have not been independently verified. No conclusive public evidence has yet been presented to substantiate the existence of such a secret arrangement.

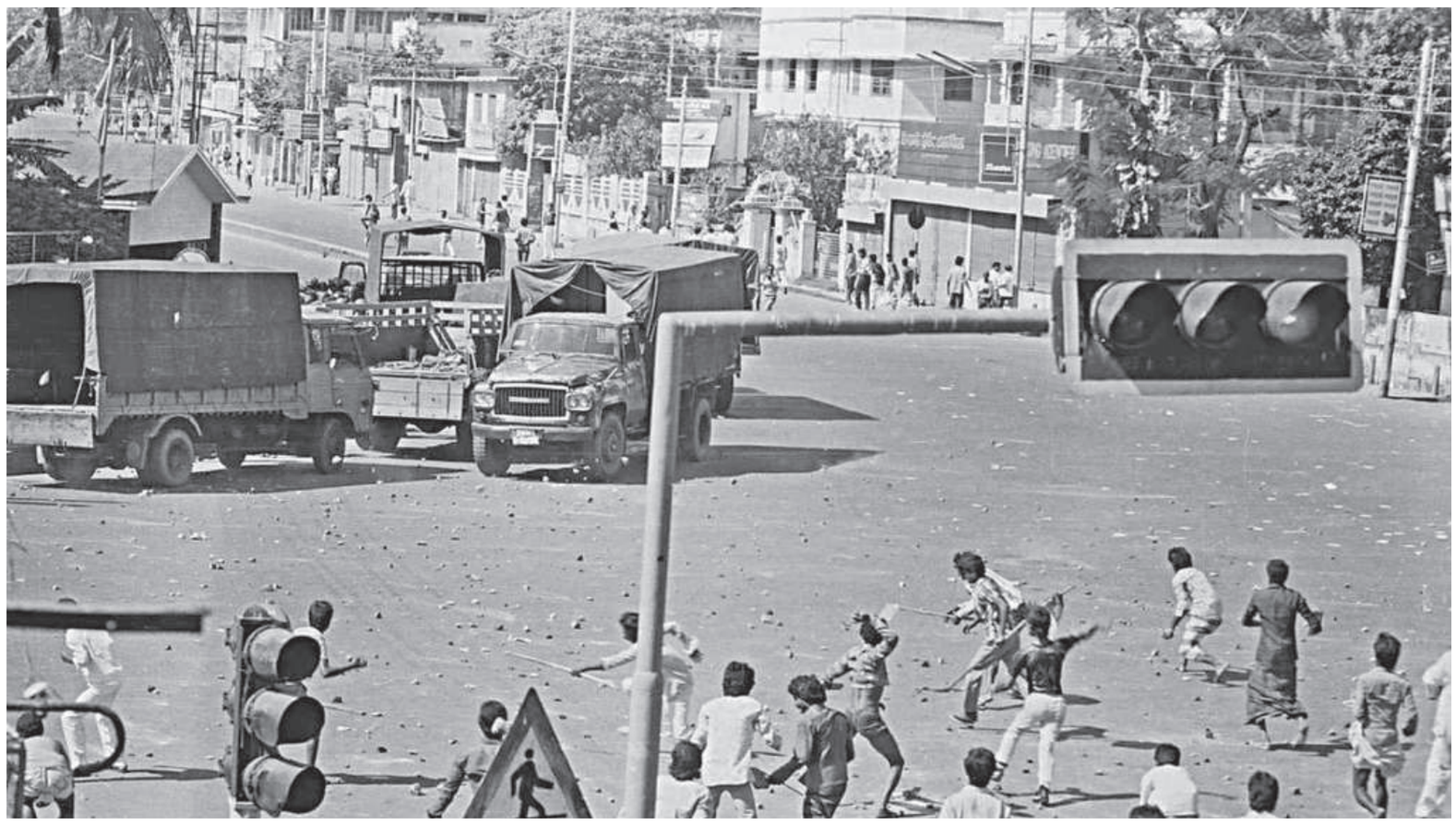
In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare famously observed that "misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." In modern political discourse, this sentiment has evolved into the maxim that "politics makes strange bedfellows," a phrase that captures the tendency of political necessity to transcend ideological boundaries. The relationship between Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami offers a striking illustration of this phenomenon.

Though separated by profound differences in political philosophy and worldview, the two parties found common ground during the 1960s in their opposition to the autocratic rule of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. In 1964, united by the broader cause of restoring democratic governance, they joined other opposition forces under the banner of the Combined Opposition Party (COP). In 1969, Awami League and Jamaat also joined several other parties to form the Democratic Action Committee (DAC).

The general election of 1970 dramatically altered Pakistan's political landscape. Awami League secured an overwhelming mandate, while Jamaat-e-Islami failed to win a single seat. Yet electoral defeat did not immediately sever the relationship. Jamaat leaders publicly congratulated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on his historic victory and expressed their willingness to cooperate. As the national crisis deepened following the postponement of the inaugural National Assembly session scheduled for March 3, 1971, in Dhaka, Ghulam Azam, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, met Sheikh Mujib and voiced support for the latter's programme of non-cooperation with the central government. For a brief moment, both parties appeared to stand on the same side of a growing constitutional struggle.

That fragile convergence, however, would not survive the seismic events that followed. The military crackdown launched by the Pakistan Army on the night of March 25, 1971, transformed the political reality, while the paths of Awami League and Jamaat diverged irrevocably because of the latter's opposition to the liberation movement.

Following independence, the Awami League government led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sought to establish a secular state. The 1972 constitution barred religious political parties, including Jamaat, from operating. Many of its leaders went into exile or remained politically marginalised. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in August 1975 marked a turning point. In the years that followed, constitutional restrictions on religion-based parties were lifted, enabling Jamaat to re-emerge. Although Awami League and Jamaat continued to regard each other with deep suspicion and remained ideological adversaries, the changing political climate gradually created conditions that would draw them into an unlikely, albeit temporary, partnership.



FILE PHOTO: **DINU ALAM**

'One of the most notable chapters in the history of Awami League-Jamaat relations unfolded during the anti-Ershad movement of the 1980s.'

History seldom moves in straight lines, however. Political relationships are rarely fixed, and alliances that seem inconceivable in one era often emerge as necessities in another. The historical record demonstrates that, despite profound ideological differences, Awami League and Jamaat have repeatedly found themselves on the same side of political struggles.

One of the most notable chapters in the history of Awami League-Jamaat relations unfolded during the anti-Ershad movement of the 1980s. This convergence became evident in the parliamentary elections of 1986. Although they contested under separate banners, both parties entered the Jatiya Sangsad, with Jamaat securing ten seats and thus gaining a degree of political legitimacy and institutional recognition that had eluded it since the country's independence. Later, the two parties also found themselves on the same side of the intensifying opposition movement against Ershad.

The 1990s witnessed yet another phase in the complex and often paradoxical relationship between Awami League and Jamaat. At the heart of the political struggle of the decade lay a crucial constitutional question: the establishment of a neutral caretaker government to oversee parliamentary elections. In pursuit of this objective, Jamaat joined Awami League and other opposition forces in a sustained movement against Khaleda Zia's BNP government. The pressure generated by this broad-based agitation eventually compelled the government to accept constitutional reforms, paving the way for the caretaker system.

Although Awami League and Jamaat did not enter into a formal governing alliance following the 1996 general election, subsequent political developments elevated Jamaat's parliamentary significance. In a fragmented political environment, its presence acquired a degree of importance that exceeded its numerical strength, enabling it to exert influence disproportionate to its representation.

The political landscape shifted dramatically once again when Awami League returned to office in 2009. Among the defining initiatives of Sheikh Hasina's government was the investigation and prosecution of crimes committed during the Liberation War of 1971. The International Crimes Tribunal emerged as the principal institution through which these proceedings were conducted. Several top Jamaat leaders were prosecuted, convicted and, in some instances, executed following judicial verdicts.

The tensions reached a new intensity in 2013 with the emergence of the Shahbag Movement, a campaign demanding harsher punishment for individuals accused of wartime atrocities. Many supporters of Awami League regarded the movement as a continuation of the unfinished moral struggle of the Liberation War. Jamaat, however, viewed it through a fundamentally different lens and mounted vigorous opposition. The result was a period marked by escalating street protests, violent confrontations, and deepening political animosity.

Bangladesh found itself increasingly polarised between competing visions of history, justice, and national identity. The prospect of any meaningful reconciliation between Awami League and Jamaat appeared more distant than at any previous moment in their shared political history.

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Today, the political landscape is once again in flux. Jamaat has emerged as a significant opposition force and harbours ambitions of expanding its influence in future elections. Meanwhile, relationships once thought durable have evolved in unexpected ways. Political allies have become adversaries, and old antagonists have occasionally discovered areas of overlapping interest. In such circumstances, the calculations of political survival often acquire greater significance than the certainties of ideology.

Whether future developments will produce new alignments remains uncertain. As Awami League seeks to reclaim political relevance and its opponents compete for influence, every actor will inevitably weigh where its interests lie and whose support may prove most valuable. In that enduring contest between principle and pragmatism, Bangladesh's political future remains unwritten, waiting for the next turn of history's wheel.

Is Britain's MI6 trying to save Pakistani media from death?



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■ HAMID MIR

The title of Mazhar Abbas's new book tells the whole story of Pakistani media. *Media Under the Shadow of Death* comes from one of Pakistan's best-known journalists, and its cover shows journalists, with their pens and cameras, imprisoned by censorship. The book was launched recently in Islamabad at an event hosted by the well-known anchor Absa Komal. Some time ago, Absa spoke outside the National Press Club in Islamabad against the non-payment of salaries at various TV channels and newspapers, and she was dismissed from her job as a consequence. For journalists like us, losing a job or being banned from the screen is nothing new. What is worrying is that a journalist as senior as Mazhar Abbas is warning the world that Pakistani media is close to death and must be saved. In his book, he also mentions the petition I filed in the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2012 with my colleague Absar Alam.

Mazhar Abbas, Asma Shirazi, and the late Arshad Sharif, who was mysteriously assassinated in Kenya while in exile, later joined me as petitioners. We went to court against the spread of corruption in the media by some state institutions and non-state actors, and we were the first to submit ourselves for accountability. We demanded that the Federal Ministry of Information's secret fund be abolished and that all the benefits given to journalists by the property tycoon Malik Riaz, owner of Bahria Town, be made public. We also asked that his accounts be investigated and that the names of all the politicians and retired military officials who benefited from him be exposed. Nothing happened. Finally, we demanded that the media adopt a code of conduct to protect its own credibility.

Malik Riaz was once very close to Imran Khan, and he faces cases over allegedly bribing him. Pakistani courts have since declared him an absconder and proclaimed offender. In 2016, he bought a luxury London property at 1 Hyde Park Place for 42.5 million pounds from Hasan Nawaz Sharif, son of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He lives in the United Arab Emirates, yet it remains very difficult to write against him in mainstream Pakistani newspapers. Anything written against him in Pakistan is often censored. He is a classic example of censorship by non-state actors.

The 2012 petition was heard over more than a hundred hearings across several years. One success was the freezing of the Ministry of Information's secret fund, once used to bribe journalists. In consultation with the petitioners and other stakeholders, the Supreme Court also drew up a code of conduct for Pakistan's electronic media, and Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) enforced it in 2015. Sadly, it was never fully implemented. The Supreme Court had imposed the code, and responsibility for its oversight also lay with the court. But some of its judges became part of politics, and their politics weakened the institution.

I have faced many fake cases masterminded by intelligence bosses and registered on the orders of some high court judges. All those judges were forced to resign after the regime change. I must say that I always got relief from the lower courts, while my problems came from the higher judiciary, which is more politicised. Today, in international rankings, Pakistan ranks among the lowest globally on everything from press freedom to the rule of law, and from governance to democracy. Mazhar Abbas's book is not only a lament for press freedom in Pakistan but also a mourning for the independence of the judiciary and parliament.

After my remarks at the launch, I was asked why I had said that media's conditions today are worse than they were under General Musharraf's military rule. I replied that during Musharraf's era, only five TV anchors, including myself, were banned, and only for a few months. As soon as he resigned from the presidency, the ban was lifted. In today's so-called democratic era, 15 TV anchors have been taken off the air. One famous anchor, Kashif Abbasi, has been missing from the screen of ARY for the last one year. This regime has even broken the record of Imran Khan's government, which banned me for more than nine months in 2021. Even those who are not banned face many restrictions. At that time, only the government or its coalition partner, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), threatened the media. Now, along with the government, various non-state elements, including some terrorist organisations, are also working against media freedom.

A few days after the book launch, I attended an important meeting in Lahore. The invitation came from Munizae Jahangir, who was removed from Aaj News only a few weeks ago because, like her mother Asma Jahangir, she remains active in defending human rights. Representatives of journalists' organisations from across Pakistan, as well as lawyers and civil society members, attended the meeting. Senior journalists, including Mujeeb-ur-Rehman Shami, Suhail Warraich, Najam Sethi, Asma Shirazi, and Arifa Noor, heard about the problems journalists face in Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan.



Pakistani journalists continue to face bans and other kinds of restrictions even during the current democratic era. FILE PHOTO: **AFP**

Saleem Shahid, from Quetta, told us that Pakistan's major TV channels and newspapers are laying off and shuttering their offices in Balochistan. Many of districts there have become no-go areas for the media. Tahir Hasan, president of one faction of the Karachi Union of Journalists, said protests outside the Karachi Press Club have been banned and cameras have been installed around the club to identify protesters. He added that the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act (PECA), 2025 is being used against journalists in Sindh. Nasir Hussain of the Khyber Union of Journalists described several measures the previous PTI government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa took to curb media freedom. He said that 30 journalists have been martyred in his province since 9/11 and that the Peshawar Press Club has also been attacked by suicide bombers.

Qamar Bhatti, secretary general of the Punjab Union of Journalists, said that PECA has been used against several journalists in Punjab, including Imran Shafqat and Sajjad Anwar, and that 60 percent of the province's journalists are now unemployed. He claimed that conditions in Punjab are worse than under martial law. Arif Bahar from Muzaffarabad said that the media in Pakistan-administered Kashmir faces the same situation as in the rest of Pakistan. Author and human rights activist Farhatullah Babar spoke about a Human Rights Commission of Pakistan report on Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Israruddin Israr from Gilgit said that Gilgit-Baltistan has no internet, so people depend on TV channels, but the channels do not cover the region.

Arshad Ansari, secretary general of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and president of the Lahore Press Club, called the PECA Act 2025 a black law and declared all the major political parties guilty of crimes against press freedom. He said that only Maulana Fazlur Rehman's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and Hafiz Naeem ur Rehman's Jamaat-e-Islami had no share in the sin of passing this law, and that everyone else's hands are stained. He announced that journalists would very soon take to the streets to save the media from death.

The good news was that Federal Information Minister Attaullah Tarar joined the meeting by video link and assured participants that the application of the PECA Act, 2025 against journalists would be discouraged. He said the law would be used only against terrorist organisations active on social media and people spreading fake news. Nasir Zaidi, the senior journalist who hosted the meeting, repeatedly stressed that we have no political agenda and that we want to protect our freedom within the framework of Pakistan's constitution.

The day after this important meeting, however, fake news accompanied by a forged MI6 document spread on social media, claiming that the Lahore meeting had been organised on the orders of the British intelligence agency. The document listed Munizae Jahangir, Farhatullah Babar and me as MI6 assets, and many known proxies of the sitting government claimed that the meeting was held on the orders of our "bosses in London."

This fake news alerted British officials, who began asking why MI6 is under fire in Pakistan. In 2012, we offered ourselves for accountability, and we are ready to do so again. Everything we have is declared in our tax returns. If the authorities truly believe that speaking about media freedom is MI6's agenda, they should read the speeches of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, who always supported a free press and, before 1947, defended many journalists booked on treason charges as a lawyer. By all means, MI6 agents in Pakistan should be found and made public. Besides, if MI6 agents want to save Pakistan's media from death, we would like to thank them, despite our criticism of many British policies.