

Aftermath of the Elections 1970: From Disparity to Dissection

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ABSTRACT

The Election of 1970 results truthfully imitated the clumsy political certainty: the existing cleavage of the Pakistani voters along ethnic and regional lines and political schism of the state between East and West Pakistan. It provided a new political design with three assorted power centers: i) the Awami League under Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman in East Pakistan; ii) the Pakistan People's Party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Sindh and the Punjab; and iii) the National Awami Party (Wali Group) and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (under Mufti Mahmud) in Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province. However, at the top of these main stakeholders was the fourth and major center of preeminence, Pakistan army with their orator, General Yahya Khan. Therefore, the first ever elections in the political history of the country, Pakistan as a nation emerged divided. This split, mainly caused by economic disparity, between the two the wings ultimately resulted in the separation of East Pakistan and emergence of as an independent and sovereign state of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Economic disparity, Adult franchise, Political awareness, uneven victory, Free and fair, Islamic Socialism, Provincial autonomy

INTRODUCTION

With the fall of Ayub Khan, the assumption of authority by Yahya Khan in 1969 only represented the replacement of one authoritarian rule by another more rigorous power. Although he insisted that he did not want to prolong his rule, but he did make an effort to create a favorable environment for himself. He recognized the necessity of both politics and politicians, and decided to play a role of arbitrator among the conflicting political groups. In particular, he concentrated upon two groups who were active in struggle against Ayub Khan; the students and workers. His government soon announced education and labour policies, which received wide support, although they failed to get any support from the Planning Commission and Ministry of Finance. Yahya Khan felt that none of the political parties would be able to win a clear cut majority in the National Assembly; the military regime would play the brokerage role and thus, stay in power. The major surprise for the ruling elites was that apart from the Punjab, the choice of the people of other provinces was based on their ethnic or regional consciousness. These elections took an about turn as the appeal of the main political parties 'regionalized' the politics instead of 'nationalized' it.¹ Both East and West Pakistan had acquired leaders of their own; their very different mandates had been legitimized by the people.

Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman wanted autonomy for East Pakistan and Bhutto wanted restoration of civilian rule and the restructuring of the economy, however, it is believed that both of them flourished on negative appeals to the illiterate voters of Pakistan, one by whipping up regional feeling against the Punjabi domination and the other by exploiting the demands brought to the surface during the mass movement of 1968-69.² Neither had any constructive

or positive approach instead it was inevitable for the forces of both leaders to collide—and, indeed, the collision came soon after the election results were announced.

Repercussion of the 1970 Elections

The state of affairs that elections of 1970 created required careful handling and it was a tragedy that the three major players in the drama did not feel the intensity of the situation. Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman had not expected the massive mandate that he received. His bargaining position was now strong and it was foolish to ignore the realities of the situation.³ Mujib's total victory made him confident of coming to power. However, his position seemed to seal the doors of compromise. Confronted with this situation Yahya Khan and his army generals came closer to Z. A. Bhutto. If the Six Points in their full rigor pointed towards the separation of East Pakistan, Bhutto's own attention seems to have been confined to West Pakistan alone. Similarly, on the question of Six Points Bhutto had maintained silence, however, with the unexpected size of Mujib's victory in the western Wing, Bhutto immediately thought of using this fact to project the Awami League as the party of one wing only which was not to be allowed to rule on the basis of their landslide victory.

Taking this plea, Bhutto made it clear that the authority at the Centre would have to be shared between the Awami League and the PPP to enable the two to executive the mandate given to them by the people.⁴ Admittedly, he had attained a large electoral victory within the bounds of West Pakistan, however, PPP's 81 seats were nowhere close to the Awami League majority of 160 seats in the National Assembly. Yet, it seems that Bhutto did not wish to assume responsibility for forming provincial governments in the Punjab and Sindh without control of the Centre.⁵ Under the LFO, the new constitution required only a simple majority in the National Assembly. The Awami League had a position to frame the Constitution single-handedly, leaving the PPP with no role to play in its framing. And more importantly, Bhutto would be restricted to playing the limited role of the Leader of the Opposition. Mujib also declared that since Six Points programme got approval of the people in the elections, this was no more his or his party's property and now none would be able to stop us from framing the constitution on the basis of Six Points programme.

Dilemma of Sheikh Mujib's Six Points

Although Mujib's Six Points, by no stretch of imagination, could be termed as an act of secession, however, Awami League's policy pronouncement after the elections caused a great anguish among the military junta.⁶ Caught in the middle, Yahya Khan visited Dacca in mid-January 1971, in order to start dialogue with Mujib-ur-Rehman. While considering the right and the technical ability of the Awami League to form a central government by its own party strength, Yahya Khan advised Mujib to include some persons from West Pakistan in his cabinet for smoother conduct of the state.

Mujib agreed to meet the West Pakistani politicians, including Bhutto, but maintained that his personal status vastly different from that of PPP leader. He made it clear, "While I am the sole elected representative of East Pakistan and enjoying total support and Mr. Bhutto's position is different in West Pakistan. Other parties have won a considerable number of seats in the Western Wing and we can associate them with us."⁷ Yahya Khan wished to insert a clause which permitted independent foreign trade and aid dealings provided such dealings were 'not against the fundamentals of the country's foreign policy'.⁸ Although Mujib did not show flexibility on the Six Point programme, nor did he compromise on the constitution making process, however, he agreed to let Yahya Khan stay on as president after the national government was formed under the new constitution.⁹ In the meantime, Bhutto, on Yahya's

suggestion, flew to Dacca on 27 January 1971, for negotiations with Mujib-ur-Rehman to find out a solution of the constitutional dilemma which would be acceptable to both the political parties. He had several days of discussion with Mujib on the Six Points, however, the Awami League leadership was not prepared to accept any amendment in the Six Point Formula and the PPP was not ready to concede all the Six Points.¹⁰ It is believed that instead of making attempts to solve the impasse, Bhutto offered his personal services: that he would be content with the portfolios of deputy prime minister.¹¹ Consequently, Bhutto returned empty-handed to West Pakistan.

General Rao Farman Ali, the Principal Staff Officer Civil Affairs, in the Government of East Pakistan, met Mujib shortly after Bhutto left and stated, “Mujib told me there was no disagreement about the Six Points between them. The dispute that arose was about power-sharing in the new government.”¹² Soon after his return from Dacca, Bhutto engaged himself in solidifying his position within West Pakistan. During the first two weeks, he conferred with his party notables and took an ‘official’ mandate from them to seek amendments to the Six Points from the Awami League.¹³ Bhutto also met Yahya Khan and explained his position to the Awami League’s programme. During his meeting with the President, he reiterated that his party would not go to the Assembly merely to “rubberstamp” a constitution that Mujib had prepared.¹⁴

However, Bhutto hoped that by mobilizing the anti-Six Points sentiments in West Pakistan; he could put pressure on Mujib to share power with his party. He held talks with Qaiyum Khan, Mufti Mahmud, Wali Khan and others. He tried to persuade them to develop a consensus on constitutional issue, which meant unanimity on amendments to the Six Points, and then untidily opposing the transfer of power until the Awami League agreed to modify the Six Points according to their demands.¹⁵ Yahya Khan, in order to break the deadlock, intervened on February 9, 1971, by inviting Mujib for a meeting in Islamabad, however, he refused to obey as he wanted inaugural session to be held at Dacca on February 15, 1971.

Yahya Khan’s Efforts to Escalate the Tension

Yahya Khan after his meeting with Bhutto on 11 February, 1971, announced that the National Assembly will meet at Dacca for its inaugural session on March 3, 1971. However, Bhutto, while addressing a press conference in Peshawar, expressed his inability to join the National Assembly session in the absence of an understanding, compromise or adjustment of the Six Point Formula. He said, “I cannot put my party men in a position of double jeopardy (by sending them to Dacca),” he said and threatened ‘a revolution from Khyber to Karachi,’ if the People’s Party were left out.”¹⁶

Yahya Khan made an attempt to break the deadlock. On February 17, 1971, he once again invited Mujib to meet him at Islamabad; however, Mujib expressed his inability to travel to the capital to meet the President.¹⁷ His insistent refusal for a dialogue made his intentions doubtful. In the meantime, Bhutto met the President on February 19, and showed his reservations about the East Pakistan’s Governor Admiral S. M. Ahsan, being a ‘pliable tool in the hands of Awami League.’¹⁸ Two days after Bhutto’s press conference in Peshawar, Yahya dismissed his civilian cabinet and reverted to Martial Law, pure and simple. Gen. Yakub and Admiral Ahsan were summoned from East Pakistan to Rawalpindi to meet on the February 22nd. Before their departure, Gen. Yakub and Admiral Ahsan met Mujib who assured them that the Six Points were negotiable.¹⁹ Yahya, who took exception to Mujib’s refusal to visit the capital, wanted firm action against him. However, both Gen. Yakub and Admiral Ahsan explained the temper of the people of East Pakistan, who felt betrayed and had risen in revolt to protect their rights.

By realizing the bitter realities, both opposed the use of force against the Awami Leaguers because, in their assessment, the use of force would bring the situation to an undesired climax and might head to the disintegration of the country.²⁰ However, it seemed that the attitude of the Junta towards the two principal actors was uneven, stiff against Mujib and compassionate toward Bhutto. In the light of Bhutto's demand that the limit of 120-day for National Assembly should be removed, Yahya Khan stated that the polarized political climate was inappropriate to hold the National Assembly session on 3 March, 1971, and the postponement would enable the political leaders to arrive at some settlement. Mujib was shocked when he came to know that the Assembly session, which was due two days later, was postponed. Many political leaders from West Pakistan, including Asghar Khan, Akbar Bugti, Maulana Hazarvi, Malik Ghulam Jilani and Mumtaz Daultana also supported Mujib's stance and condemned Bhutto for his role in the postponement of the Assembly session.²¹ However, public reaction in East Pakistan was spontaneous and hostile. An instant wave of public anger swept the whole East Pakistan which provoked a serious political storm.

In an attempt to conciliate Bengali sentiment, Yahya Khan declared that the postponed secession of the Assembly would meet on 25 March 1971, but the announcement did not make any affect. By realizing the intensity of the situation, at last, he belatedly arrived at Dacca on March 15, 1971. However, his reception line at the Tejgoan Airport did not include any Bengali politician or bureaucrat.²² The Government-Awami League negotiations were held between 16-24 March 1971. On the invitation of the President, some elected members of National Assembly from West Pakistan, had already assembled there, notably Mufti Mahmud, Abdul Wali Khan, Abdul Qaiyum Khan, Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo and Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani. Yet, they did not have any role in the talks because Yahya Khan gave them a general idea about the negotiations but did not keep them fully informed.²³

Mr. Bhutto joined the negotiations at Dacca on March 22, 1971, after Mujib agreed to meet him. The meeting, however, made no progress and all common grounds between Yahya's military regime and Mujib's Awami League disappeared.²⁴ In the middle of negotiations, the Awami League celebrated 23 March, the Pakistan Resolution Day, as the "Resistance Day". Sensing the failure of the talks, on the afternoon of 24 March, Gen. Yahya Khan ordered Gen. Tikka Khan to launch the already conceived "Operation Searchlight", a military contingency plan, for restoring normalcy.²⁵ However, with the military intervention, the whole complexion of the problem in East Pakistan has changed as it shattered the last hope of saving the unity of Pakistan.

Indian Involvement

India's deep involvement in East Pakistan crisis was beyond doubts. It became the primary source of support, which not only provided sanctuary to the rebels and the refugees but also infiltrated an unspecified number of its own civilian and military 'volunteers'.²⁶ The Indian Parliament also passed a resolution on 31 March, 1971, calling upon the Pakistan Government to stop "the massacre of defenseless people" in East Pakistan.²⁷ It seems that India's primary objective was to use the East Pakistan crisis to breakup Pakistan. Its continuous support to the Bengali separatism did not leave any ambiguity in this regard. Mr. Subramaniam, Director of the Indian Institute for Defense Studies, pointed out, "The breakup of Pakistan is our interest and we have an opportunity the like of which will never come".²⁸

From mid-1971, India began to train the Mukti Bahini, mainly from the youth in the refugee camps. East Pakistan crisis had brought out into the open the strong links that India developed with the Awami League and its leadership. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, extended her support to the 'liberation' of East Pakistan in the Lok Sabha, and

declared the problem of East Pakistan could not be regarded as the internal affair of Pakistan.²⁹ Similarly, on April 10, 1971, when a provisional government was formed in Mujibnagar (Kushtia District); Mujib was named president, Syed Nazrul Islam vice president and Tajuddin Ahmad prime minister of the 'Republic', the 'Bangladesh Government' moved to Calcutta and operated from there.³⁰ India not only encouraged the Awami League to set up the Bangladesh Government-in-Exile but also extended its support to the cause. From March through November, the Bengali activists received direction and guidance from their party leaders living in India.³¹

During the military operation, the loss of life, property and infrastructure was immense but the real loss was the widespread feelings of the alienation among the Bengalis. To counter the publicity of the Bangladesh movement, the Martial Law regime started external publicity. Foreign journalists, who were thrown out of Dacca on March 25, 1971, were invited to return.³² Similarly, amnesty was granted to returning refugees from India and much-publicized (but not effective) reception centers were opened to welcome them back. On June 28, 1971, Yahya announced his long-awaited plan for political settlement. Although he promised a constitutional government and restoration of civilian rule in the next three or four months, however, the Awami League was yet to be banned as a political organization.³³ Such a settlement was obviously not acceptable to the leadership of the Awami League. Politically, in West Pakistan, it appeared that a measure of opposition, publicly and privately, gradually developed against the Martial Law regime.

In the next three months, the regime continued its plan of "civilianization" of its administration, however, a long list of names of the Awami League members of the National Assembly was published against whom the regime brought specific "criminal" charges; and by election dates for these "vacant" seats were announced.³⁴ In early September, Yahya Khan replaced the military governor in East Pakistan, General Tikka Khan with a civilian governor and a civilian cabinet was installed as an interim arraignment to facilitate the by-elections but the situation in East Pakistan continued to deteriorate. During October and early November, the Indian troops made their first major "incursions" into East Pakistan in support of Mukhti Bahini units.³⁵ For operation, the Indian authorities had already put up to eight infantry divisions, nearly three dozen Border Security Force Battalions and about 100,000 Mukti Bahinis, besides its second line forces, which gave India a devastating superiority in number over the weak ground force held by Eastern Command.

On the night of 20 November, 1971, the Indian Army openly launched an attack in order to 'settle for anything less than liberation'.³⁶ Even before its marching order, the Indian Army had captured about 300 square miles of 'border bulges' in East Pakistan. On December 6, India recognized Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state and in retaliation Pakistan cut off diplomatic relations between the countries.³⁷ The same day, Yahya announced a civilian setup at the Centre with Nurul Amin of East Pakistan as Prime Minister and Bhutto as Deputy Prime Minister but it was too late.

Separation of East Pakistan

Bhutto, as a Deputy Prime Minister and at the same time as a Foreign Minister, was immediately sent to New York to represent Pakistan's case before the United Nations (UN). At this critical stage, China remained firm in its support against Indian aggression. Chinese Premier, Chou-En-Lai, assured President Yahya Khan, "In case of Indian involvement in the Pakistani affairs, China would not be an idle spectator but will support Pakistan."³⁸ However, Pakistan had to face the Soviet anger for its cooperation with China. All the members of the UN, except USSR and India, were unanimous on the immediate ceasefire. On 6 December,

1971, the Soviet Union had imposed its first veto, thus thwarting the Security Council's resolution calling for a cease-fire.³⁹ Moreover, Poland, with Soviet support, had moved a resolution in the Security Council on December 14, which called for the release of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, transfer of power to the elected representatives headed by him, an initial ceasefire for seventy-two hours, withdrawal of the Pakistani forces to pre-set positions for their evacuations, return of West Pakistani civilian personnel and withdrawal of Indian forces after consulting the newly recognized authorities.⁴⁰

With repeated Soviet vetoes facilitating India's movement in East Pakistan, Bhutto attitude changed and he rejected the idea of ceasefire. Weeping openly, he said, "I find it disgraceful to my person and my country to remain here...Legalize aggression, legalize occupation, I will not be a party to it."⁴¹ In a gesture of angry protest, he tore up a Security Council paper and stormed out of the Security Council. The day Bhutto walked out of the debate; the Indian forces had reached Dacca and the Eastern Command surrendered to avoid 'further bloodshed'.⁴² The involvement of the Indian army in the last phase had been decisive. At 14.30 hours GMT on the 17th December, a ceasefire was signed and Yahya Khan sent a message to Bhutto to return. He was carefully monitoring the situation, landed at Islamabad airport on 20th December, and drove straight to the President's House, where Yahya and his colleague were waiting for him. Yahya was still hoping to get away with something and returned to his previous Chief of Staff position in the army.

However, Bhutto after assuming the office of a President and a Civilian Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) had a few plans; first he wanted all powers for himself and second he did not want Yahya Khan anywhere near to the seat of power. Consequently, in the evening of the same day, in a radio broadcast, he announced the retirement from service of Yahya Khan and six other senior generals ended the embarrassing thirty-three months of Yahya Khan's rule.⁴³ Thus, Yahya Khan, after an unsuccessful effort to cling to power, made way for the Peoples Party to assume authority in the 'remaining Pakistan'.

CONCLUSION

The elections of 1970, a landmark in the political history of Pakistan, produced a result that few political analysts or the contesting parties had anticipated. It cut through the flesh of both conventional body politics in both wings of the country. Sheikh Mujib's Awami League swept the polls from East Pakistan on one hand and Bhutto's PPP won the majority seats from the Western Wing on the other. However, impetuous Bhutto and unfaithful Mujib shared the considerable blame for the disintegration of the country. Ultimately, the reins of 'new Pakistan' came into the hands of PPP, which embarked on the formation of government at the Centre and in the provinces. Armed with the powers of the President and the Chief Martial Law Administrator, Z.A. Bhutto made swift and resolute moves. Thus, Bhutto's actions appeared to have been aimed at emphasizing the radical change in circumstances and at consolidating his own position further complicated the existing problem.

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