

The Separation of East-Pakistan: Analyzing the Causes and Fixing the Responsibility

Javed Iqbal, Ph.D*

In 1971, Pakistan as a nation suffered the most terrible shock in its entire history. We lost one wing of our country due to reasons that are well known but yet not very well understood. In December 1971, East-Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh as a result of a movement of Bengali Separatism.

The movement for Bengali separatism did not develop overnight. It had its roots in the history of Pakistan. Some of the fundamental questions about this tragedy continue to agitate the minds of the intellectuals as to whether the break-up of Pakistan was due to the failure of the political leadership, the political ambitions of the top brass of the army or an international conspiracy.

Many factors, such as the geographical and Socio-cultural difference between the two wings, the language issue, the economic disparity and exploitation of the East-Pakistan, disparity in civil service and armed forces, differences over constitution making, the degeneration of Muslim League and the rise of regional Bengali Parties, and the political grievances and alienation of East Pakistan, were responsible for the process of decay that finally resulted in the loss of East Pakistan and the dismemberment of the country.

* Lecturer, Department of History, University of Peshawar, Peshawar.

In this paper, an effort will be made to revisit those factors and causes that led to this national tragedy and the events that could easily be averted from shaping up by prudence and flexibility. After the publication of the *Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report*, many people may question the need and importance of writing about this topic but *Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report* was just an inquiry report determining the role and responsibility of those who were responsible for the split and not giving insight into the historical roots of the problem.

The Rise of Bengali Sub-Nationalism

From the very beginning, the relations between the two wings were difficult and complicated. The three main areas of conflicts between East and West Pakistan were the language issue, differences regarding constitution making, and economic centralism. The question of the status of Bengali language was resolved by the mid 1950s but no consensus could ever be reached on constitutional and economic issues.¹ The following were the factors that led to the rise of Bengali nationalism among the people of East Pakistan.

i. The Geographical and Socio-Cultural Differences

Immediately after independence, Pakistan's two wings were set apart by one thousand miles of enemy territory. Both air and maritime contact could be blockaded by India at any time. This unique geographical position could pose a grave threat to the integrity of the country. With the exception of religion and a common struggle for independence, there was practically nothing common between the two wings of the country. In short, Pakistan lacked all the usual bonds that unite a nation, viz., social setup, culture, language, etc.²

Geographical separation was the base for other differences i.e., racial identity, language, habits of life and culture. East Pakistan was only one-seventh of the total area of the country but its

1 Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.20.

2 Safdar Mahmood, *Pakistan Divided: Study of the Factors and Forces Leading to the Breakup of Pakistan in 1971* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), p.2.

population exceeded the total population of all other provinces and states of West Pakistan.³ In West Pakistan, people spoke different languages but there was a reluctant consensus on Urdu as their common language. In the East Pakistan, Bengali was the common language but also a symbol of Bengali nationalism and pride. Moreover, unlike West Pakistan, which was predominantly Muslim, East Pakistan had important non-Muslim minorities⁴, particularly the Hindus who largely controlled the economy and education of the eastern wing. The Hindu teachers played a vital role in poisoning the Bengali youth against West Pakistan, prescribing textbooks that contained material against the Ideology of Pakistan. The photographs of Gandhi and Nehru were reportedly displayed on the walls in many educational institutions instead of Jinnah. A favorable lobby existed amongst the intelligentsia of East Pakistan, which welcomed anti-Pakistan literature poured in from India.⁵

The leadership in West Pakistan mainly came from the landlords and in eastern wing from professionals like lawyers, teachers and retired government officials. The people in the eastern wing were, therefore, more conscious about political matters and well aware of their rights compared to the people in the western wing who had been living in a society dominated by the feudal lords and the tribal chiefs.⁶ Education was more widespread in the eastern wing and middle class was strong and assertive.

Hailing from different strata of society, the leaders and administrators from East and West Pakistan had conflicting ideas and aspirations and they could not understand properly each other's problems. The Bengali administrators and leaders were more egalitarian and democratic in outlook, closer to the people in

3 G.W. Chaudhry, *Pakistan: Transition from Military to Civilian Rule* (England: Scorpion Publishing Ltd., 1988), p.12.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Safdar Mahmood, pp.6-7.

6 M. Asghar Khan, *We've Learnt Nothing from History, Pakistan: Politics and Military Power* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.9.

mood and attitude and less haughty than their West Pakistani counterparts.⁷

Indifferent to the Bengali point of view, the West Pakistan dominated ruling class of early Pakistan stressed on a strong center, Urdu as the symbol of national unity and Islamic ideology, and the strengthening of the armed forces in West Pakistan at the cost of overall economic and social development. They considered every demand of East Pakistanis as a conspiracy and a threat to the Islamic ideology and integrity of the country.⁸

Diversity is the essence of a federation but the attempt to impose uniformity where diversity was desirable had unfortunate consequences; the Bengalis, particularly the intelligentsia, began to look more and more to West Bengal for cultural affinity and bonds. Culturally, and perhaps psychologically, the country was divided long before the crisis of 1971.⁹

II. The Language Issue

The language issue originated even before the creation of Pakistan. In the Lucknow session of All India Muslim League in 1937, the Bengali delegates strongly opposed a resolution proposing Urdu as language of Muslim India and the official language of Muslim league.¹⁰ The Bengali Language Movement started almost immediately after independence, demanding that Bengali should be the medium of instruction, language of the courts, administration and mass communication in East Pakistan. They also demanded that it should be one of the state languages of Pakistan along with Urdu.¹¹ The Bengalis opposed Urdu as the only state language on the plea that if Urdu is made the state

7 *Ibid.*, p.4.

8 Hasan Zaheer, p.16.

9 G.W. Chaudhry, *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 1974), p.11.

10 Hasan Zaheer, p.23.

11 Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.84.

language, the educated Bengalis will become illiterate and disqualified for government services.¹²

The movement for Bengali language gathered the spontaneous support of the Bengali civil servants, academics and students, some members of the Provincial Assembly and a few ministers as well. By February 1948, the controversy had come out to the streets. The East Pakistan Student League, founded in the first week of January 1948 by Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman, led the agitation.¹³

On 11 March 1948, a student demonstration in favor of Bengali language was baton charged and a large number of students were arrested.¹⁴ Jinnah's announcement during his visit to Dacca in March 1948 that the language of the province could be Bengali but the state language of Pakistan was going to be Urdu followed a disturbance in the Dacca University Convocation.¹⁵ Moreover, in January 1952, Khwaja Nazimuddin's support to Urdu as the only state language during his visit to Dacca provoked a bitter reaction in the press and demonstrations were organized in favor of Bengali.¹⁶

On 26 January 1952, the Basic Principles Committee of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan recommended that Urdu should be the only state language. It sparked off a wide wave of resentment in East Bengal. Bengalis held protest meetings in Dacca and it was decided to hold a general strike on 21 February, during which processions were taken out despite the official ban imposed by Mr. Nurul Amin's administration, leading to clashes with the police and the killing of three students and a number of other people.¹⁷

12 *Ibid.*, pp.84-85.

13 Hasan Zaheer, p.21.

14 *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

15 Tariq Rahman, p.87.

16 *Ibid.*, p.90.

17 Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender* (Karachi: Oxford University Press), pp.216-17.

Although Bengali was recognized as the state language along with Urdu in the Constitution of 1956¹⁸ but, perhaps, it was too late to defuse the rising spirit of Bengali nationalism.

iii. Economic Disparity and Exploitation of the Eastern Wing

The most serious challenge to Pakistani nationalism was the economic disparity between East and West Pakistan. The Bengalis believed that the Eastern wing of the country was ruthlessly exploited by the western wing and that East Pakistan was deprived of its due share in the developmental funds and foreign aid.¹⁹ The bulk of the country's revenue was spent in West Pakistan because the federal capital was there. Moreover, a high percentage of the budget was spent on defense, which was all concentrated in West Pakistan. East Pakistan earned most of the country's foreign exchange by the export of jute; yet most of it was spent on the industrialization of West Pakistan.²⁰

The Bengalis claimed that what was earned in East Pakistan was spent in West Pakistan²¹ because East Pakistan provided 60 percent of the total revenue, compared to 40 percent by West Pakistan, but it received only 25 per cent for its expenditure. The rest, 75 per cent was spent in West Pakistan.²²

iv. Disparity in Development Planning

In the six-year development program (July 1951 to June 1957), and in the First and Second Five Year Plans (1955-60 and 60-65), East Pakistanis again complained of injustice.²³

The economic disparity between the two wings was recognized and admitted in different reports and economic studies conducted by the central government during Ayub Khan's

18 *Ibid.*, p.219.

19 Matiur Rehman, ed., *Second Thoughts on Bangladesh*, with a foreword L.F. Rushbrook Williams (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, n.d.), p.9.

20 G.W. Chaudhry, p.9.

21 Hasan Zaheer, p.51.

22 Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, p.7.

23 *Ibid.*, pp.54-55, 90.

Presidency. Ayub admitted confessed the injustice and he promised that development in East Pakistan will be accelerated to make up for the deficiency.²⁴ The Constitution of 1962 also promised to adopt such economic policies, which would help in removing the disparities in per capita income between the provinces.²⁵ The disparity, however, increased after ten years of Ayub's rule. The per capita income in West Pakistan was 32 percent higher than East Pakistan in 1959-60 and 61 percent higher in 1969-70.²⁶

Yahya Khan also tried to remove the economic disparity between the two wings through "step by step concessions" but the impatient Bengalis were by then in the mood of a revolution rather than waiting for an evolutionary process.²⁷

v. Disparity in Civil Services and Armed Forces

The Bengalis were very poorly represented in the civil service and in the Army. Moreover, the civil and military officials from West Pakistan stationed in East Pakistan considered the Bengali Muslims inferior converts from lower caste Hindus.²⁸

In 1970, about 85 percent of the armed forces belonged to the Punjab whereas the majority of population was in East Pakistan. Some claim that this disparity was not intentional on the part of the West Pakistan dominated ruling elite but a result of the legacy of British rule during which the Punjabis were preferred in the armed forces due to their marshal spirit and willingness to join military service.²⁹ However, there was no justification for the disparity in the bureaucracy. As the Bengalis did not have adequate representation in the armed forces and the bureaucracy, they always opposed military rule and never trusted these two players in the body politic of Pakistan.³⁰

24 *Ibid.*, p.91.

25 *Ibid.*, p.93.

26 G.W. Chaudhry, p.15.

27 *Ibid.*, p.60.

28 *Ibid.*, p.6.

29 M. Asghar Khan, pp.8-9.

30 *Ibid.*, p.9.

The disparity in the civil services and Armed Forces was rapidly disappearing because in 1966, Ayub Khan had allocated 60 percent of the vacancies to East Pakistan. In 1965, the East Pakistan CSP officers constituted 34 percent of the total strength of the Civil Services but by 1969, their share had risen to 40.8 percent.³¹

Yahya, in order to give some share to the Bengalis in the top positions of the administration, made six Bengali CSP officers “Central Secretaries” and gave directions to all the ministries that whenever a senior post became vacant, Bengali candidates should be accorded priority ‘even if this meant disregarding of the principle of seniority’. The quota for Bengali recruitment in the armed forces was also doubled. It was a step in the right direction but came too late; it should have been taken in the early 1960s when Bengali nationalism was still in a nascent stage.³²

vi. Differences over Constitution-Making

The Controversy over constitution making started as early as March 12, 1949 when the Objective Resolution was adopted and a Basic Principles Committee was constituted to report on the main principles on which the constitution of Pakistan was to be framed. The Bengali leaders raised objections to some points of the Objective Resolution and the interim report of the Basic Principles Committee, which they thought would lead to a unitary central government, which will make East Pakistan a colony of West Pakistan.³³

In constitution making, the two main issues hard of solution were the ratio of representation in the Central legislature and the distribution of powers between the center and the provinces.³⁴

After the failure of the First Constituent Assembly, the Second Constituent Assembly gave the country its first constitution on 29th February, 1956, which provided for a unicameral legislature with

31 Safdar Mahmood, pp.32-33.

32 G. W. Chaudhry, p.54.

33 Hasan Zaheer, pp.28-30.

34 G.W. Chaudhry, pp.13-17.

parity of representation between the East and the West wings.³⁵ Bengali was accepted as one of the state's languages.³⁶ However, East Pakistan was not satisfied with the parity principle. The demand for more provincial autonomy still persisted and it finally culminated into the Six-Point program of Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman.³⁷

VII. The Degeneration of Muslim League and the Rise of Regional Bengali Parties

Muslim League fell into selfish hands soon after independence and became a hotbed of intrigues. The internal dissensions in the Party caused the decline of the only national organization of the country and the rise of regionalist parties. In February 1948, prominent League leaders like Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani and Fazlul Haq left the Muslim League. In June 1949, they formed a new party called East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. Maulana Bhashani was elected President of this new party, while Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman, a student leader, was appointed the Joint Secretary of the party. In March 1950, the party was re-named as All-Pakistan Awami Muslim League and Suharwardi was appointed as the President and Chief Organizer of the Party. In July 1953, Sheikh Mujeebur Rehman was made General Secretary of the party. Provincial autonomy and Bengali as the state language topped the new manifesto of the Party.³⁸

In April 1953, the Awami Muslim League dropped the word 'Muslim' from its name and it became the Awami League. The old Muslim Leaguers resigned from it and their seats were filled by moneyed Hindu politicians who later on influenced its policies decisively. Fazlul Haq, 'the lion of Bengal', formed his own political party in Dacca called 'Krishak Sramik Party' (The Labour Peasant Party).³⁹ In the elections of 1954, Muslim League was

35 *Ibid.*, p.18.

36 M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh at 26: Encountering Bifurcated History and a Divided National Identity", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.XXI, No.3, Spring 1998, p.49.

37 Safdar Mahmood, p.64.

38 Siddiq Salik, pp.17-20.

39 *Ibid.*, p.217.

completely routed. It secured only 9 seats out of the total number of 309 seats in East Pakistan Assembly.⁴⁰

viii. Political Grievances and Alienation of East Pakistan

The first political shock for the East Pakistanis came in 1947 when the more popular and charismatic leader, Hussain Shaheed Suharwardi, was not allowed to assume the Parliamentary leadership of East Pakistan Assembly. Instead, Nazimuddin, who had no base among the masses, was elected Chief Minister because Liaqat Ali Khan considered Suharwardi as a rival, who could challenge his authority and position in the party.⁴¹

The Bengalis were further angered when Governor General Ghulam Mohammad dismissed Khwaja Nazimuddin's ministry. They declared it as 'a conspiracy against the Bengalis'. Ghulam Mohammad tried to pacify the Bengalis by installing another Bengali Mohammad Ali Bogra as Prime Minister but he had no power base in Bengal and played into the hands of his Punjabi patron, the Governor General.⁴²

The rise of Bengali nationalism and anti-West Pakistan feelings resulted in the defeat of the ruling Muslim League in the elections for the Bengal Legislative Assembly in March 1954. The Awami League had formed a United Front with other East Pakistan political parties to oppose the ruling Muslim League. The first two items on the twenty-one point agenda of the United Front manifesto were Bengali as one of the state languages and provincial autonomy. A student nominee of the Front defeated the Muslim League Chief Minister Nurul Amin.⁴³ It followed the unanimous vote in favor of more provincial autonomy in East Pakistan Assembly which raised concerns among the Punjabi leadership about a solid Bengali block in the Parliament, sweeping the smaller provinces and the Punjab. In face of this new challenge, Malik Firoz Khan Noon, the Punjab Chief Minister of the time, proposed the formation of a zonal sub-federation of the

40 Safdar Mahmood, p.19.

41 Hasan Zaheer, xviii (Preface).

42 Siddiq Salik, p.217.

43 *Ibid.*, pp.217-218.

provinces in West Pakistan on 15 September 1954, with the ulterior motive of counter-balancing the Bengali power in the parliament.⁴⁴ Resultantly, on October 14, 1955, One Unit was established in West Pakistan. The Bengalis considered it another move to deprive them of their legitimate rights.⁴⁵

In August 1955, Chaudhri Mohammad Ali became the Prime Minister while Ghulam Mohammad was still the Governor-General. Mohammad Ali's appointment caused bitter resentment in East Pakistan as it violated the established tradition that if the Prime Minister was from East Pakistan the Governor-General would be taken from West Pakistan or vice versa. In September 1956, Hussain Shaheed Suharwardi was commissioned to form the ministry at the Center. However, he was forced to resign in October 1957 to escape dismissal. His resignation was termed by East Pakistanis as the result of a conspiracy of vested interests of West Pakistan.⁴⁶

If judged on the basis of facts and figures, the Bengali grievances of political alienation seemed credible. From 1947 to 1958, East Pakistan got only 42 percent and West Pakistan 58 percent representation in the Central Cabinets except for Suharwardi's cabinet in which East Pakistan had 57 percent share.⁴⁷

ix. The Agartala Conspiracy Case and the Rise of Sheikh Mujeeb

After the death of the most popular Bengali leader, Hussain Shaheed Suharwardi, Mujeeb was now alone in the spotlight and able to demonstrate his charisma.⁴⁸

By 1960s, the Bengali leaders felt that East Pakistan could be emancipated only if the strong central government was replaced by

44 Hasan Zaheer, p.35.

45 Siddiq Salik, p.219.

46 Safdar Mahmood, pp.20-23.

47 *Ibid.*, pp.38-40.

48 Hafiz Malik, "The Problems of Regionalism in Pakistan", *Pakistan in Transition*, ed. W.H. Wriggins (Islamabad: University of Islamabad Press, 1975), p.99.

autonomous and comparatively more powerful provinces.⁴⁹ Finally, Sheikh Mujeeb Rehman announced his famous Six-Points on February 6, 1966, termed by West Pakistanis as a move for secession.⁵⁰

What made Mujeeb a real leader was the Agartala Conspiracy case in January 1968. Sheikh Mujeeb and 34 other Bengalis were accused of planning the secession of East Pakistan and the establishment of an independent Bengal with the Indian assistance.⁵¹ When the trial started in July 1968, it evoked a bitter reaction in East Pakistan. Mujeeb came out of the trial as a hero after he was released from the prison under public pressure. The trial gave such popularity to Mujeeb that would, otherwise, have taken a lifetime to acquire. Another accused of the Agartala Conspiracy, Sergeant Zahoorul Haq, was shot dead while in military custody at Dacca cantonment on February 15, 1969. The Bengalis took it as a deliberate murder of their hero.⁵²

Mujeeb's alleged involvement in the case added to his popularity in the East Pakistan. The gulf between the central Government and the people in the Eastern Wing had become so wide that what Ayub Khan regarded a treason was an act of patriotism and service to the people in the eyes of East Pakistanis.⁵³

The Election of 1970: The Beginning of the End

When Yahya Khan took over from Ayub Khan, he promised to hold elections to the Central Legislature in October 1970, and on March 30, 1970, issued the Legal Framework Order. According to the LFO, out of the total number of 313 members of the National Assembly who were to draft the new constitution, 169 were to be elected from East Pakistan on the principle of one-man one-vote.

49 *Ibid.*, p.98.

50 Siddiq Salik, p.22.

51 Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan 1947-1986* (Lahore: Progressive Publications, 1987), p.180.

52 Siddiq Salik, p.223.

53 Asghar Khan, pp.25-26.

He also dissolved One Unit in West Pakistan⁵⁴ and expressed his willingness to concede demands for maximum autonomy for East Pakistan, provided it were within the framework of United Pakistan.⁵⁵ The inner cabinet of Yahya and the West Pakistani leaders, however, opposed unlimited provincial autonomy and insisted that constitutional matters in the proposed one chamber legislature should be decided by at least 60 percent vote. Otherwise, they feared, the 'brute Bengali majority' would impose their own constitution on the remaining units of West Pakistan.⁵⁶

In 1966, a Convention was called at Lahore to voice an organized opposition to the regime of Ayub Khan. The Convener of this Convention was Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan. Sheikh Mujib also attended and it was there that the Six Points Program was first made public. The Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report suggests that the six points were not authored by Sheikh Mujib but by a West Pakistani civil servant. It further suggest that the Six Points had been formulated before the Lahore Convention and a copy of it had been sent to Mr. Nurul Amin, Leader of the Pakistan Democratic Party who showed it to another member of his party Mr. Mahmud Ali and both agreed that it contained the seeds of secession which they could not support.⁵⁷

Mujeeb, on his part, gave the impression that he was satisfied with the promises made by Yahya Khan and that his Six Points were not "the Koran or Bible".⁵⁸ However, he made it clear that if the extent of provincial autonomy were defined or the principle of 'one man, one vote' were modified by any special procedure of voting on the constitutional issue, it would mean the end of negotiations and the beginning of an armed confrontation. Some of the generals seemed to prefer a confrontation before election, i.e. before Mujeeb could consolidate his position in East Pakistan and

54 Hafiz Malik, pp.100-101.

55 G.W. Chaudhry, p.83.

56 *Ibid.*, pp.91-93.

57 *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War as Declassified by the Government of Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Ltd., n. d.), p.56.

58 G.W. Chaudhry, p.85.

emerge as the sole leader of the Bengalis but Governor Ahsan warned Yahya that a United Pakistan would not survive a confrontation with Mujeeb.⁵⁹ Yahya did not want to annoy any of the two parties. Although he did not define the limits of provincial autonomy but the Legal Framework Order (LFO), which was announced on March 31, 1970, contained five points or principles as the minimum requirements for a United Pakistan. One of these five principles was the territorial integrity of Pakistan.⁶⁰

Mujeeb accepted the five principles laid down in the LFO and in his speeches and statements, he assured the territorial integrity of Pakistan by saying “Pakistan has come to stay and there is no force that can destroy it”.⁶¹ But at the same time, Mujeeb was reported to have said to his inner cabinet that his ultimate aim was to establish Bangladesh and that he would tear the LFO as soon as the elections were over. He also hinted to his colleagues about the help from “outside sources”.⁶²

The October date for holding the election was put back because of severe Monsoon flooding in East Pakistan. On November 12, 1970, a terrible cyclone blasted five East Pakistani coastal districts. The death toll was placed well above a million and property damage was total in the affected regions. The rescue work was slow and ineffective because of different reasons and Yahya also did not visit the affected areas until some days after the calamity,⁶³ giving more reasons to East Pakistanis to hate and distrust their West Pakistani countrymen.⁶⁴

The Awami League leadership took full advantage of this situation and they created an emotional hysteria in East Pakistan. The Central Government was accused of the ‘deliberate’ and ‘cold

59 *Ibid.*, p.91.

60 *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.

61 *Ibid.*, p.97.

62 *Ibid.*, p.98.

63 Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.330-31.

64 Lawrence Ziring, “Militarism in Pakistan: The Yahya Khan Interregnum”, *Pakistan in Transition*, ed. W.H. Wriggins (Islamabad: University of Islamabad Press, 1975), p.217.

blooded' murder of a million people in the cyclone affected areas of East Pakistan. The environment helped them in sweeping the polls in East Pakistan.⁶⁵

The Awami League contested the election on the basis of Six-Points, which in the view of the military junta was 'nothing less than a subtle form of secession' but they hoped that Mujeeb would not be able to carry the majority or at least absolute majority in East Pakistan. The Central Government, therefore, did not prohibit Mujeeb from using the Six-Points program in his election campaign.⁶⁶ In the election campaign, Mujeeb and his followers openly preached the idea of Bangladesh without any hindrance, making mockery of the Martial Law regulation that talking against the territorial integrity of Pakistan would be severely dealt with. Even the map and the flag of the Bangladesh were prominently and openly displayed in meetings held at Dacca.⁶⁷

What happened on the election day is extensively written about and needs not to be repeated here. The returns of the elections confirmed the Awami League as the majority party, securing 167 seats out of a 313 members of the National Assembly. The Pakistan Peoples' Party of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto emerged as the second largest party with 81 seats, all of them in West Pakistan.⁶⁸

The Awami League's landslide victory was due to many factors, including the rise of Bengali emotionalism, politicization of the November cyclone, and the all out support of the Hindu voters to Awami League.⁶⁹

Mujeeb had indicated that he would modify his Six-Point plan after the election but a Bengali regional chief of the civil intelligence services had given Yahya enough indication that Mujeeb's strategy seems to be to use the elections to establish his credentials as the 'sole leader of the Bengalis' and after it he would

65 Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan*, p.181.

66 *Ibid.*, pp.216-17.

67 G.W. Chaudhry, pp.98-99.

68 Lawrence Ziring, pp.332-333.

69 Hafeez Malik, p.102.

‘show his teeth’. There were also reports that Mujeeb had begun to have contacts with New Delhi.⁷⁰

After elections, Mujeeb declared that the Six Points were “the property of the people of Bangladesh and that there could be no compromise on it.”⁷¹ The military junta was hesitant in calling upon him to form his government because he had no representation in West Pakistan.⁷²

The subsequent rumbling over the meeting of the Assembly between Mujeeb, Bhutto and Yahya is well documented and needs no mention here. However, one point that needs clarification is that Bhutto alone was not against the holding of meeting at Dacca and responsible for the delay in the meeting. The Pakistan Muslim League Qayyum Group and the Jamiat Ulma-i-Pakistan stood by his side while other minority parties indicated their willingness to attend the Constituent Assembly.⁷³ However, Yahya Khan announced the postponement of the Constituent Assembly for an unknown period on March 1, 1971.⁷⁴

The announcement provoked a bitter and violent reaction in East Pakistan and in order to defuse the tension building up, Yahya fixed March 25 as the date of Constituent Assembly’s first session. Bhutto agreed to attend the meeting but this time Mujeeb put forward certain conditions for Awami League’s attendance of the Assembly in his speech to a public meeting at Dacca on March 7, 1971.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto delivered his notorious “*Idhar ham Udhar tum*” (we here you there) speech at Karachi on March 14, 1971.⁷⁶

70 G.W. Chaudhry, p.138.

71 *Ibid.*, p.145.

72 Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan: The Enigma of Political Development* (England: W. M. Dawson & Sons Ltd., 1980), p.102.

73 Hafeez Malik, p.107.

74 *Ibid.*, pp.109-11

75 Rafi Raza, *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Pakistan 1967-1977* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.68-69.

76 *Ibid.*, pp.70-71.

In an attempt to resolve this desperate situation, Yahya flew into Dacca and opened negotiations with Mujeeb on March 16, 1971.⁷⁷ The last Minute Mujeeb-Yahya-Bhutto talks were programmed to fail because the Junta had decided that even if Mujeeb yielded his Six-Points, the army would still intervene.⁷⁸ However, the Bengalis believed that Yahya Khan never intended to negotiate seriously and honestly and that his goal was to maintain status quo.⁷⁹

Yahya's trip to Dacca and his final bids to save the unity of Pakistan was futile because Mujeeb had declared the unilateral independence of Bangladesh and invited Yahya was invited by him as "the guest of the people of Bangladesh". In view of the situation, foreign journalists of the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Economist* and *Times Magazine* were reporting that "Sheikh Mujibur Rehman appears to have declared the independence of East Pakistan".⁸⁰

After the failure of the Dacca dialogue, Yahya denounced Mujeeb as a traitor and banned the Awami League. In a broadcast he said, "...The man and his party are the enemies of Pakistan and they want East Pakistan to break away completely from the country. He has attacked the solidarity and integrity of this country. This crime will not go unpunished."⁸¹

Although Yahya and Bhutto put the entire blame on Mujeeb for the failure of the Dacca dialogue but 'none of the three parties could be totally exonerated for their part in the failure of the Dacca dialogue.'⁸² The later insistence of Yahya Khan and the political leadership of the West Pakistan on abandoning the Six Points, or at least some of them, was not possible for Mujeeb because the Six

77 Hafeez Malik, p.115.

78 Lawrence Ziring, pp.352.

79 Prof. Hafeez Malik, Anwar Syed, Shahid Javed Burki, "Memorandum of Conversation with a Bengali Scholar and Nationalist, Professor Rahman Sobhan, November 20, 1971", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. XXI, No.3, Spring 1998, p.49.

80 G.W. Chaudhry, p.161.

81 *Ibid.*, p.180.

82 *Ibid.*, p.181.

Points had captured the imagination of the people in East Pakistan to the extent that Mujeeb could not abandon them⁸³ without risking his own popularity and credibility in the eyes of the East Pakistanis.

The Military Action and the Fall of Dacca

In the meanwhile, the general strike in East Pakistan became a non-cooperation movement. The Awami League was in full control of East Pakistan's economic and political life. Mujeeb had started issuing orders like a de-facto ruler a parallel government of Awami League was practically operating. The East Bengal Regiment and the East Pakistan Rifles had switched over loyalties to the Awami League.⁸⁴

After loot, plunder and massacre of people loyal to Pakistan, the military crack-down finally began on March 25, 1971. The Bengali officers at Jessore and Chitagong massacred their own former colleagues and their families. The Awami League attacked wherever the Pakistani Army was weak.⁸⁵ It was designed to provoke the Army, enabling Mujeeb to drive a wedge between the Bengali and non-Bengali population.⁸⁶

Mujeeb formally declared the independence of Bangladesh at midnight on March 25⁸⁷ and on March 27, Major General Ziaur Rehman, Second in Command of the East Bengal Regiment, announced the formation of the provisional Government of Bangladesh from Chittagong Radio Station.⁸⁸ Yet another declaration of independence was issued by Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister of the exiled government in India, on April 17,

83 Asghar Khan, p.27.

84 Hafeez Malik, pp.112-13.

85 Matiur Rahman, *Bangladesh Today: An Indictment and a Lament* (Islamabad: University of Islamabad Press, 1981), pp.95-96.

86 *Ibid.*, pp.98, 101.

87 G. W. Chaudhry, p.186.

88 Lt. General JFR Jacob, *Surrender of Dacca: Birth of a Nation* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1997), p.34.

1971, saying “Pakistan is now dead and buried under a mountain of corpses.”⁸⁹

The Pakistani soldiers are accused of being involved in brutal killing, looting and rape but the Awami League guerrillas were not far behind the Pakistan Army in this regard. Even those Bengalis who took part in the fight against the Pakistan Army now confess that there was no atrocity that was not committed, no indecency that was not practiced against the non-Bengali population. Men were sliced open, women raped, arms and legs of children were amputated and girls were molested before the eyes of their parents.⁹⁰

On the other hand, the Pakistan Army’s brutal actions can never be condoned or justified in any way. The Army’s operation in which thousands of innocent people including women, the old and the sick, and even children were killed while millions fled from their homes shelter either in remote places or in India, is a shame to remember.⁹¹

The acts of killing and rapes committed by the Pakistan Army were magnified tenfold or twenty-fold by the Indian propaganda machinery⁹² and according to one Bangladeshi writer ‘the Indian propaganda media did much, much more than the Indian Army in effecting the separation of East Pakistan from Rawalpindi.’⁹³

Because of the large-scale migration of panic stricken people to India, Pakistan stood thoroughly discredited while India gained the sympathy and admiration of the world for her help to millions of helpless men, women and children.⁹⁴ In the guise of this help, India offered sanctuary to Mukti Bahini (The Liberation Forces) who had crossed over to India to obtain arms and ammunition.⁹⁵

89 G. W. Chaudhry, p.186.

90 Matiur Rahman, p.96.

91 G. W. Chaudhry, pp.181-182.

92 Matiur Rahman, p.98.

93 Matiur Rahman, “Second Thoughts on Bangladesh”, pp.22-23.

94 Matiur Rahman, pp.101-102.

95 G. W. Chaudhry, p.187.

On December 3, 1971, the Indian army crossed the East Pakistan border and moved towards Dacca. Their military successes exceeded even their own expectations. In a two week's war, Pakistan lost half its navy, a quarter of its airforce and third of its army. Crucial factors in this success and in the speed of Indian advance to Dacca were collaboration of the Awami League guerrillas and the support of the masses.⁹⁶ The old Pakistan had died years before, but its burial was marked on December 16, 1971, when General Niazi formally surrendered his 93,000 men army to General Jagjit Singh Arora.⁹⁷

Mujeeb had been arrested, tried and sentenced to death by a military court but later on Bhutto remitted the sentence and sent him to East Pakistan. He also recognized Bangladesh as an independent state on February 23, 1974.⁹⁸

Fixing the Responsibility: General Tikka Khan and General Niazi

During his interview with the Hamoodur Rahman Commission, General Niazi categorically denied all the allegations of excesses committed by the army during his period of command, except the admission of a few cases of rape but he asserted that those guilty were duly punished. He blamed everything on General Tikka Khan, not naming him but referring to him by the names "Changez Khan" and "Butcher of East Pakistan", the names that according to General Niazi the Pakistani Military officers had earned due to the indiscriminate use of force and atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army in the early days of the military action. However, appearing before the same Commission, Major General Rao Farman Ali, the Advisor to the Governor of East Pakistan admitted that he had heard harrowing tales of rape, loot, arson, harassment, and of insulting and degrading behaviour but he denied the charges leveled against General Tikka Khan by General Niazi. He said that Tikka Khan had written instructions to act as a guide for decent behavior and recommended action required to be taken to win over the

96 Tariq Ali, *Can Pakistan Survive: The Death of a State* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), pp.94-95.

97 Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History*, p.369.

98 Muhammad Munir, *From Jinnah to Zia* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Ltd., 1980), pp.95-96.

hearts of the people.⁹⁹ Another witness before the Commission, Lt. Colonel Aziz Ahmad Khan, confessed that Brigadier Jehanzeb Arbab had asked him to destroy all houses in Joydepur and General Niazi during his visit to his unit in Thakargaon and Bogra had asked him (as encouragement and appreciation) as to how many Hindus they had killed? He said that in the month of May, he had received written orders to kill the Hindus from Brigadier Abdullah Malik of 23rd Brigade.¹⁰⁰

The report of the Commission has also given details about the “glaring cases of moral lapses amongst officers posted in East Pakistan” in which General Niazi has been accused of immorality and indulgence in “sex matters”. The witnesses examined by the Commission confirmed General Niazi’s relations with two different women, Mrs. Saeeda Bukhari of Gulberg Lahore who was running a brothel and acted as General’s tout for receiving bribes and ‘getting things done’ in handling of Martial Law cases and another woman called Shamim Firdous of Sialkot who was playing the same role as Mrs. Saeeda Bukhari of Lahore during his posting as GOC Sialkot and later as GOC and Martial Law Administrator at Lahore. Later during his stay in East Pakistan, he came to acquire a ‘stinking reputation’ owing to his association with women of bad repute and indulgence in the smuggling of *Pan* from East Pakistan to West Pakistan.¹⁰¹

The Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report has partly exonerated General Tikka Khan from responsibility for the excesses allegedly committed by the Pakistani troops by concluding that ‘it is in evidence that Lt. General Tikka Khan was always willing to redress grievances and take disciplinary action whenever complaints of excesses were brought to his notice’ and that he had issued repeated circulars, warning the troops to refrain from acts of violence and immorality. However, there was enough evidence before the Commission ‘to suggest that the words and actions of Lt. General Niazi were calculated to encourage the killings and rape etc.’¹⁰² On another occasion, he encouraged the soldiers to procure food-grains and other essential supplies from the civilian sources when he told them, “What have I been hearing about shortage of rations? Are not there any cows and goats in this country? This is enemy territory. Get what you want. This is what we used to do in Burma.” The

99 *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War*, p.509.

100 *Ibid.*, p.510.

101 *Ibid.*, p.504.

102 *Ibid.*, p.514.

Commission seems to be approving of this procurement of food-grains from civilian sources but with the reservation that 'this should have been done under a proper method of accounting, so that compensation could be paid on return of normal condition.' The Commission observed that as no such method of accounting was adopted, it led to a general feeling among the troops, including their officers, that they were entitled to take whatever they wanted from wherever they liked. Later on, when some commanders carried out searches of the barracks occupied by the troops for the recovery of the looted material, they found televisions, refrigerators, typewriters, watches, gold, air-conditioners and other valuable items.¹⁰³

In one instance, eight senior officers of the Pakistan army including Brigadier Jehanzeb Arbab, former Commander 57 Brigade, were involved in large scale looting including the theft of Rs. 13,500,000 from the National Bank Treasury at Siraj Ganj. The amount was intercepted by a JCO at the Paksi bridge when it was being carried in the lower part of the body of a truck. Later on, the inquiry in this case remained incomplete due to the outbreak of the war.¹⁰⁴

The Hamoodur Rehman Commission concluded that 'there is substance in the allegation that during and after the military action excesses were indeed committed on the people of East Pakistan' although the magnitude of these excesses were much exaggerated and 'highly colored' in the estimates put forward by the Bangladeshi authorities.¹⁰⁵

In the final analysis, we can rightly conclude that the events that led to the separation of East Pakistan were a series of misunderstandings and mishaps which were cleverly and cunningly manipulated and exploited by a hostile neighbor. Why did it happen and what would have stopped it are the questions still whirling in the minds of the people of Pakistan. We cannot undo what has already happened in the past. However, we should learn lessons from our history and avoid committing mistakes like we did in the past. The present situation in Pakistan is not much different from that which led to the separation of East Pakistan. Sensitive matters should be dealt with prudence, tolerance, and large-heartedness to avoid another tragedy like the one we experienced in 1971.

103 *Ibid.*, p.503.

104 *Ibid.*, p.506.

105 *Ibid.*, p.514.

While the separation of East Pakistan brought about democracy in the truncated Pakistan which survived, events in 1972 and 1973, once again, and despite a democratic dispensation, brought to the fore issues of greater centralisation against so-called regionalism and provincialism, with little accountability and retribution of those who were responsible for the breakup of Pakistan. Field Marshal Ayub Khan's reasons for taking the decision that he announced on Tuesday [March 25] are well elucidated in his valedictory message to the people as also in his letter calling upon the Army Chief, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, to assume the responsibility of preserving the country's security and restoring normal conditions. To understand the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, it is necessary to put the events of that year into the proper perspective of the unstable relationship between East and West Pakistan from 1947 onwards. Hasan Zaheer examines the genesis of the single state of Pakistan, and analyzes the crises which marked the relations between the two areas from 1947 to the army. To understand the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, it is necessary to put the events of that year into the proper perspective of the unstable relationship between East and West Pakistan from 1947 onwards. Hasan Zaheer examines The Separation of East-Pakistan: Analyzing the Causes and Fixing the Responsibility. Javed Iqbal, Ph.D. In 1971, Pakistan as a nation suffered the most terrible shock in its entire history. We lost one wing of our country due to reasons that are well known but yet not very well understood. In December 1971, East-Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh as a result of a movement of Bengali Separatism. The movement for Bengali separatism did not develop overnight. It had its roots in the history of Pakistan.