A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

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CHAPTER 11

The Pakistan experiment

Under its new name – East Pakistan – the Bengal delta now joined a unique experiment in state-making.* There were three reasons why Pakistan was a very special state. First, it was founded upon religious nationalism. Religion was supposed to cement a new national identity, something that had not been tried before – the only other modern example of a religiously based nation-state being Israel, which was founded a year later than Pakistan. Second, Pakistan was a state administering two discrete territories, separated from each other by about 1,500 km of Indian terrain (Map 11.1). West Pakistan was by far the larger of these two wings but East Pakistan was more densely populated. In fact, most Pakistani citizens lived in East Pakistan: the first population census in 1951 revealed that Pakistan had 78 million inhabitants, of whom 44 million (55 per cent) lived in East Pakistan.

These two factors combined with a third: Pakistan did not become heir to any of the colony's central state institutions. India, on the other hand, inherited the capital New Delhi as well as most of the civil bureaucracy, armed forces and police. The bulk of the colony's resources and industries, and its major port cities of Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata, also went to India. By contrast, Pakistan inherited largely raw-material producing regions. Whereas the new rulers of India supplanted the British in the old centre of colonial power, the new rulers of Pakistan had a much harder time to establish themselves. In other words, Pakistan was uniquely experimental: no other postcolonial state combined the loss of its administrative hub, the need to govern two unconnected territories and the ambition to found a national identity on a religious one.

In the eastern 'wing' of the country the situation was especially difficult. In August 1947, 'the new East Pakistan government was hastily

* Initially the eastern wing of Pakistan was known officially as 'East Bengal'. It became 'East Pakistan' in 1956.

Map 11.1. The two wings of Pakistan, 1947–71.

housed in a College for Girls [Eden College in Dhaka], with a large number of improvised bamboo sheds added to it for greater accommodation. On partition, East Pakistan received only one member of the former Indian Civil Service [the elitist corps of colonial bureaucrats, the 'steel frame' that had kept the colony together] who belonged to that region. Six others were hastily promoted from the Provincial Civil Service.'[1] As a result, the civil service of East Pakistan was largely non-local, and decision-making was in the hands of officials with little knowledge of East Pakistan's needs. An official publication described the predicament of the administrators in heroic terms:

> For the many directorates there was no accommodation at all and these were sent to outlying districts. One Minister sat in a boat on the Buriganga river, disposing of files and transacting official business. Hundreds of officers chummed together in ramshackle tenements. Even camps were a luxury and bamboo constructions sprang up to provide shelters for officials and staff who were used to comfortable Calcutta flats and rooms.[2]

The General Officer Commanding (East Bengal), who arrived in January 1948, later reminisced:

> The provincial government . . . was newly formed and poorly staffed. But worse still, it was politically weak and unstable. There was no army. All we had in East Pakistan at the time of Independence were two infantry battalions [one with three and one with only two companies]. We had very poor accommodation: at

Headquarters there was no table, no chair, no stationery . . . we had virtually nothing at all; not even any maps of East Pakistan.[3]

These initial uncertainties and the artificial nature of Pakistan's unity fuelled the desire for a strong, centralised state. The ruling party, the Muslim League, benefited from the prevailing mood in Pakistan, which was one of euphoria. Having attained a sovereign homeland, Muslims could now safeguard their political, religious and cultural rights and they could complete their economic emancipation. But it did not take long for them to realise that the road ahead was anything but smooth: the two elements that most Pakistanis shared – an Islamic identity and a fear of India – proved insufficient to keep them united. Immediately fights broke out over the equitable distribution of resources, both material and symbolic. Only three months after independence a first serious crack in the edifice of Pakistan appeared over the question of the national language. It was the initial portent of enormous tensions over how the new state should be organised. These strains would gradually spoil the prospect of building a Pakistani nation. Right from the beginning, they took the form of a confrontation between Pakistan's two wings over issues such as language, autonomy, food security and economic policy. In the unfolding drama of Pakistani politics, the Bengal delta would play the role of the disenfranchised sibling clamouring consistently and unsuccessfully for rights withheld. Throughout the twenty-four years of the Pakistan experiment, the country's various rulers shared two nightmares: to be humiliated by India and to see control of the state pass democratically to East Pakistan. The latter fear would be their undoing. It animated an extraordinary political obstinacy that would, in the end, lead them to wage war on the majority of Pakistan's citizens. This strategy blew up in their faces, resulted in their utter humiliation by India and left them no other choice but to separate themselves from East Pakistan and hang on to what was left of their power in Pakistan's western wing.

LANGUAGE

In 1947 the new Pakistani elite faced the difficult task of welding its citizens into a united Pakistani nation. Immediately the question arose of the language in which to conduct Pakistan's state business. The Pakistan Educational Conference of November 1947 proposed Urdu as the national language, a suggestion that was opposed by representatives from East Pakistan. A few months later an East Pakistan member of the

Constituent Assembly tabled an amendment to allow the Bengali language to be used in the Assembly alongside Urdu. He was sharply rebutted by the prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, who averred:

> Pakistan has been created because of the demand of a hundred million Muslims in this subcontinent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu . . . It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language.[4]

This was a quite extraordinary statement in view of the fact that Pakistanis spoke dozens of languages and that Urdu was spoken by only 3 per cent of them. Bengali was very clearly the principal language of the country: it was spoken by 56 per cent of all Pakistanis.[5] So why was the prime minister so adamant about Urdu?

The language issue stood for a more general cultural and political divide within the fledgling state. Muslim politicians in Bengal had imagined Pakistan differently from their counterparts in Northern India. The Bengalis had dreamed of a land free from the economic domination of Hindus, and they imagined a leading role for themselves as representatives of the majority of Pakistan's citizens. North Indian Muslim politicians, on the other hand, had pictured themselves as the natural leaders of Pakistan because they considered themselves to be the guardians of the Muslim renaissance movement in South Asia and, therefore, arbiters of the future of all Muslims. They insisted that their vision of Pakistan should rightfully take precedence.

From the beginning, the 'North Indian' view dominated the institutions of state. There were two regional groups that endorsed it. The first became known as the Muhajirs (= migrants). They were largely members of Urdu-speaking intellectual and trading elites from North India who moved to Pakistan's cities in their hundreds of thousands and immediately exerted an influence on politics and social life that was way out of proportion to their numbers. What made them unusual immigrants was that many of them expected the local population to adapt to them rather than the other way around. They took hold of almost all higher positions in the administration and the executive power. Most of these immigrants settled in West Pakistan, but over 100,000 Muhajirs made their new homes in East Pakistan. The second regional group was Muslims from Punjab. They were heavily overrepresented in the armed forces, manned the state administration and controlled valuable irrigated land. The Punjabis progressively outflanked the Muhajirs to become the hegemonic power in Pakistan. This was symbolised in 1959 by the transfer of the

capital from Karachi (Pakistan's prime Muhajir city) to the Punjab garrison town of Rawalpindi and from there to newly constructed Islamabad a decade later (Map 11.1).

The Bengali political elite took exception to the North Indian view of Pakistan's future. The country's new rulers, concentrated in West Pakistan, used Islam as the political idiom to justify their actions and this caught the Bengalis in a quandary: their protests were easily dismissed as un- or anti-Islamic. This was no mere tactical ploy on the part of West Pakistani politicians. There was a widespread perception in West Pakistan that Bengali Muslims were not only socially inferior but also lesser Muslims because they did not adhere to many of the cultural practices that North Indians considered properly Islamic. The message from West Pakistan was that however passionately Bengalis might think of themselves as Muslims, they fell short of the mark and they could not be fully-fledged Pakistanis unless they shed much of their Bengaliness. In this climate the dilemma for politicians from East Pakistan was that they needed constantly to underline their Islamic *bona fides* and at the same time defend a regional interest.

The language issue became the focal point of this conflict because imposing Urdu was part of a mission to 'Islamise' East Pakistan. Many in West Pakistan knew very little about the Bengali language but thought of it as in need of 'purification' from Hindu influences. To them the Bengali script (evolved from Sanskrit), the Sanskritic vocabulary of Bengali and the dominance of Hindus in the Bengali literary pantheon were all irksome (see box 'The Bengali script').[6] The Bengali Muslims' obvious attachment to their language and literature was puzzling and their rejection of Urdu rather suspect.

When students in East Pakistan came to know about the plan to make Urdu the national language, they held meetings and demonstrations and then formed the first Language Action Committee in December 1947. Things came to a head in March 1948, when general strikes were observed in East Pakistan's towns and the movement's leaders were arrested and injured. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, governor-general of Pakistan at the time, visited Dhaka a few days later. Addressing a large audience, he stated that the Bengali language could be used in East Pakistan:

> but let me make it clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore, so far as the state language is concerned, Pakistan's language shall be Urdu. But as I have said, it will come in time.[7]

The Bengali script

South Asia is a subcontinent of many languages but also of many different scripts. Most major languages use their own alphabet. Bengali or Bangla (*bāṃlā*) is no exception. Written from left to right, its elegantly rounded letters hang from a headline (unlike English letters, which stand on a base-line) (Plate 11.1). The Bengali script evolved over centuries from the Brahmi script (see chapter 2). It has more letters than the English alphabet (eleven vowels and thirty-six consonants) and these render sounds that are difficult to reproduce in English writing. Hence transliterations of Bengali have recourse to inconvenient dots and dashes (diacritical marks) to distinguish various sounds, such as *n/ṅ/ṇ*, *s/ṣ/ś*, and *a/ā*.

The visual distinctiveness of written Bengali had always been a matter of pleasure and appreciation for literate Bengalis. After the emergence of Pakistan, however, it took on a new meaning. The language movement made it politically significant. Now it was not just the language itself that grew into a symbol of resistance and cultural pride. Each Bengali letter could be used as a badge in the cultural guerrilla war. As a result, even today, the Bengali script is much more than just a way to write a language. It has become a deeply emotive emblem of identity and self-respect.

আমার ভাইয়ের রক্তে রাঙানো একুশে ফেব্রুয়ারী
আমি কি ভুলিতে পারি

Plate 11.1. A sample of Bengali writing.
'How can I forget the twenty-first of February, splattered with my brother's blood . . .?'
These are the first lines of a famous song of the 1950s, composed by Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury. They can be transcribed as 'Amar bhaier rokte rangano ekushe February ami ki bhulite pari'; their formal transliteration is 'Āmār bhāiyer rakte rāṅāno ekuśe phebruyārī āmi ki bhulite pāri.'

This uncompromising attitude led to rapid disillusionment with the Muslim League government amongst East Pakistani intellectuals, civil servants, politicians and students. This was not just a matter of regional pride, cultural identity and democratic principles but also a reflection of frustrated career ambitions. Urdu-speaking candidates were preferred for jobs in the state bureaucracy; in East Pakistan, this excluded almost all locals (fewer than 1 per cent spoke Urdu as a second language) and favoured North Indian immigrants.

The language movement, or Bhasha Andolon (*bhāsā āndalan*), gave rise to a new type of politician in East Pakistan: the Bengali-speaking student agitator. Throughout the Pakistan period students at schools, colleges and universities often played a decisive role in turning political grievances into popular resistance and forcing the Pakistan state to change its policies. The most critical event of the language movement, and a pivotal moment for the Pakistan experiment, occurred in early 1952. There was a growing sense of deprivation and disappointment in East Pakistan, and a feeling was spreading that a new form of colonial rule had replaced British imperialism. The language movement, which had declined after 1948, reignited when the new prime minister of Pakistan, Khwaja Nazimuddin, came to Dhaka and addressed a large crowd at a central green. When he announced that the people of East Pakistan could decide what would be the provincial language but only Urdu would be Pakistan's state language, there was a very angry reaction. Students responded with the slogan 'We demand Bengali as a national language!' (*rāśtrabhāsā bāṃlā cāi!*). Dhaka University went on strike and a number of organisations called a protest meeting, chaired by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Bhashani was a long-term supporter of the idea of Pakistan who had broken with the Muslim League in 1949 to form a new party, the Awami [People's] Muslim League.[8] The meeting sharply denounced the decision to make Urdu the state language and also rejected a government plan to introduce Arabic script for written Bengali. It decided to call a general strike or hortal (*hartāl*) and demonstrations throughout East Pakistan on 21 February 1952.

The government imposed a ban on these demonstrations in Dhaka, and although some organisers hesitated to violate it, many students were determined to persevere. Thousands of boys and girls from schools and colleges all over Dhaka assembled on the campus of Dhaka University together with university students. They then started marching and shouting slogans. As soon as they passed the campus gates armed policemen baton-charged them. The students retaliated by throwing bricks, upon which the police used tear gas and then fired into the crowd. Many were injured, and five people, including a nine-year-old boy, were killed. Over the next few days more demonstrations, killings and arrests occurred, and a memorial was hastily erected on the spot where the first killings had taken place (Plate 11.2).

This memorial was removed by the authorities and recreated several times before it was replaced by a concrete monument, the Martyrs' Memorial or Shohid Minar (*śahīd mināŕ*), in 1962 (Plate 11.3).[9] Today this monument continues to be a focal point of national identity politics

Plate 11.2. Students making a memorial for those who died defending the Bengali language, February 1952.

and there are martyrs' memorials in every delta town. The twenty-first of February (*Ekushe*) became a key national holiday, and in 1999, following a proposal by the Bangladesh government, UNESCO created International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on 21 February.

The events of 1952 were critically important, and not just because the Pakistani armed forces had turned murderously violent against fellow Pakistanis demonstrating for their rights, thus exposing the brutal nature of the state's leadership. This had happened before, for instance in July 1948, when the army put down a police revolt in Dhaka. What made 1952 a defining moment was that it marked a sharp psychological rupture. For many in the Bengal delta, it signified the shattering of the dream of Pakistan and the beginning of a new political project, still hazy and fully supported by only a few: the search for a secular alternative to the communal idiom of Pakistan politics and for an autonomy that the delta had last experienced in pre-Mughal times.[10]

The Pakistan government completely failed to understand the depth of feeling underlying the language movement and the demand for

Plate 11.3. Central Martyrs' Memorial or Shohid Minar, Dhaka.

regional autonomy for East Pakistan, first voiced formally during constitutional discussions in 1950. It critically misinterpreted the movement as a conspiracy by 'clever politicians and disruptionists from within the Muslim community and caste Hindus and communists from Calcutta as well as from inside Pakistan'.[11] The Pakistan government would use this conspiracy theory time and again in an attempt to expose any East Pakistani protest as the work of puppets of, or conspirators with, the 'enemies of Pakistan' – among whom Hindus, communists and Indians figured prominently.

ELECTORAL POLITICS

The events of February 1952 turned East Pakistanis categorically against the Muslim League government. This became clear to all in 1954, when East Pakistan held its first provincial elections (the rulers of Pakistan did not dare concede national general elections till 1970).[12] The elections of 1954 were also the first elections ever in the Bengal delta on the basis of a

universal adult franchise. Throughout East Pakistan, the ruling Muslim League was routed and deeply humiliated: out of 309 seats, it won only seven. The language movement continued till 1956, when the Pakistan Constituent Assembly agreed to accept both Urdu and Bengali as state languages after all and Pakistan finally had a constitution.[13] By that time, however, the struggle for autonomy among East Pakistanis had moved beyond the question of language.

The elections of 1954 were won by an alliance known as the United Front and its style of politics has dominated politics in the Bengal delta ever since. This style is best described as mobilising the street: it depends heavily on drumming up popular support by means of fiery speeches delivered at enormous public rallies, organising protest marches and general strikes and issuing political manifestos. The United Front was a shaky coalition of parties sharing little more than being against the incumbent Muslim League. The largest of these parties was the Awami Muslim League; it alone bagged about 46 per cent of the seats, replacing the discredited Muslim League as a new political organisation with broad legitimacy. The United Front's election manifesto consisted of twenty-one points. Four of these had to do with language questions; others dealt with autonomy, citizens' rights and economic emancipation. The economic demands reverberated strongly with the rural electorate. Most people in the eastern delta had imagined Pakistan first and foremost as a peasant utopia that would bring deliverance from Hindu landlords, merchants and moneylenders as well as an end to agrarian stagnation. Prosperity was far more important to them than the division of state power or language or religious issues. They were enthusiastic about the manifesto points demanding that the zamindari system be abolished, agriculture modernised and floods controlled. The middle classes, on the other hand, were attracted to the idea of rationalising pay scales, reforming education and nationalising the jute trade. Economically, the first years of Pakistan had been a struggle. The defeat of the Muslim League was as much a verdict on its failure to bring prosperity as on its political and cultural arrogance.

The mid-1950s were a brief period of rekindled hope for East Pakistan's middle classes. To many it seemed that it might yet be possible to bring the state under the control of the people. In the colonial period the state had been distant and autocratic, and the early Pakistan state had turned out to be quite similar. Only a minuscule elite from East Pakistan had been allowed to take part in the Pakistan state, always on terms not of their own making. As a result, even the most powerful East Pakistanis

never had a sense of owning the post-1947 state. The elections of 1954, however, gave them renewed hope of a real partnership. This hope was soon tempered, however, when the new government was summarily (and undemocratically) dismissed, initiating a four-year period of political confusion and instability.

In 1955 the Awami Muslim League renamed itself Awami League in order to stress its non-communal character. The party carried its reformist and secular message to a wide readership through its daily newspaper *Ittefaq* (Harmony). Events at the apex of the Pakistan state strengthened its appeal. Awami Leaguers walked out of the Constituent Assembly in protest against Pakistan's first constitution, which did not meet the party's long-standing demands. Nevertheless the constitution came into force in March 1956. It declared Pakistan an Islamic state and installed a president with extensive powers. In the ensuing political confusion the Awami League leadership was actually asked to join a new provincial government in East Pakistan and, after much discussion, decided to do so. One of the junior members of the new cabinet was a thirty-six-year-old party organiser by the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The decision to join the government caused a schism in the party: in 1957 its founder Maulana Bhashani left the party to form the National Awami Party (NAP), which attracted many left-wing followers.[14]

Soon, however, all this political turmoil was of little direct relevance. The entire political class was swept aside when, in October 1958, the Pakistan army staged a *coup d'état*, abrogated the constitution and imposed martial rule. Thus ended Pakistan's first experiment with electoral politics and parliamentary democracy. A dictator now headed the state. He was Ayub Khan, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The coup capped a process in which, during the mid-1950s, Pakistan's bureaucratic and military institutions had gradually risen to a position of dominance over elected institutions. Another way of putting it is that the popular, participatory nation lost out to the non-democratic state apparatus that Pakistan had inherited from colonial rule. This was reflected not only in the timing of the coup – just months before the first national elections that had been scheduled for early 1959 but were now cancelled – but also in the personality now taking charge of Pakistan's affairs. Unlike the politicians he brushed aside, Ayub Khan had spent his whole life in the service of the colonial state (from military training in Britain in the 1920s to fighting for the British empire in Burma in the 1940s) and then in that of the Pakistan state (becoming

commander-in-chief in the 1950s). Throughout his rule, his main concern would be to strengthen the state and make it impervious to popular forces.

The coup of 1958 was as critical an event as the language movement for understanding contemporary Bangladesh. It provided a crucial model for successive military rulers, who used it after Bangladesh became independent and who would rule the country during most of the final quarter of the twentieth century. Whereas the language movement was a clear manifestation of the popular, participatory nation attempting to influence the state, the coup of 1958 augured in a state that was relatively autonomous from the nation. Rather than depending on links with the structures of economic power and social control within the country, senior civil and military officials came to rely increasingly on their connections with international guarantors. This constellation gave rise to intense misgivings about the legitimacy of their power.[15] Bangladesh was to inherit this state structure designed to favour the military and bureaucratic top brass and in perpetual need of external financial and political support against popular forces within the country.

DICTATORSHIP

The coup of 1958 signalled the determination of Pakistan's elite – its army leaders, top bureaucrats and richest businessmen – to put a stop to what they saw as the politicians' ineptitude and corruption. The defeat of the Muslim League in East Pakistan had left the country without any party that could claim to have nationwide legitimacy. Building a unified Pakistani nation seemed harder than ever. The coup leaders were confident that the army was the only institution in the country that could provide the firm hand that Pakistan needed to put it on the right track. To this end they abolished parliamentary democracy, locked up troublesome politicians, curtailed the judiciary, muzzled the press, suspended citizen's rights and introduced martial law. Now army men took control of the civil service, and the executive branch of the state became all-powerful. Initially the military became involved in economic policy-making as well, but when this led to chaos they decided to exert control from the background, leaving the limelight to the civil service.

For East Pakistan, all this took on a special meaning. Here military rule meant that power was now even more decisively in the hands of non-locals. East Pakistan's elite had wielded power mainly through political mobilisation, not through the army or the bureaucracy. The headquarters of Pakistan's army, air force and navy were all in West Pakistan. The vast

majority of the armed forces' personnel were recruited from West Pakistan; a mere 3 per cent of the higher ranks were East Pakistanis. West Pakistanis dominated Pakistan's central administrative apparatus (filling 93 per cent of the higher posts) and even East Pakistan's provincial administration. Even though the new regime inducted more East Pakistanis, particularly in the provincial administration, this did not alter the general impression among East Pakistanis that their province was essentially an internal colony of West Pakistan, or, more precisely, of its dominant province, Punjab. Ayub Khan's personal views of Bengalis were in fact classically colonial. In his autobiography he described Bengalis as having 'all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and [having] not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new born freedom. Their popular complexes, exclusiveness, suspicion, and a sort of defensive aggressiveness . . . should be recognized and catered for and they be helped so as to feel equal partners and prove an asset.'[16]

True to the tradition of many military dictators, Ayub Khan declared that the coup had been carried out in the defence of democracy. It was aimed 'not against the institutions of democracy, but only against the manner in which these were functioning'. In his view, the prevalent forms of democracy were too complex to be operated successfully by the 'simple and illiterate peoples of Pakistan, and too remote to attract their active participation'.[17] A new system was introduced in 1959, ostensibly to teach the populace democratic ways and to prepare them for eventual full participation in representative government. This system was given the name 'basic democracies'. It was reminiscent of the British colonial system of political tutelage known as 'local self-government', and, like this precursor, it aimed at bringing political processes under bureaucratic control and at localising political issues. Rejecting the parliamentary form of government, banning political parties and restricting urban influence, the basic democracies combined paternalism and full control by state officials with some trappings of electoral representation, but only at the lowest level. In 1962 an authoritarian constitution was promulgated with a view to perpetuating the regime indefinitely. It breathed an utter distrust of popular power and representative government, gave extraordinary powers to the president (as Ayub Khan now styled himself) and created a feeble national assembly. Islamabad would be the seat of the national government and Dhaka (now designated the 'second capital') would be the principal seat of the national assembly. Soon a complex of futuristic buildings materialised on the

Plate 11.4. The Bangladesh Parliament, originally conceived as Pakistan's National Assembly Building. Designed by Louis Kahn in 1962, it was completed in 1983.

outskirts of Dhaka to accommodate the assembly. Today these buildings house the Bangladesh parliament (Plate 11.4)

The military regime saw itself as stern, fair, constructive, efficient and avuncular. Most East Pakistanis, however, saw it as autocratic, imperialist, violent and geared to perpetuating the vice-regal power of Ayub Khan. The Ayub regime was even less prepared than Pakistan's politicians had been to give concessions to East Pakistan – not surprising in view of the fact that both the civil service and the army were essentially West Pakistani institutions. The regime thought that firm paternalism was the magic solution to the perennial fear of Pakistan's rulers: disruption of national unity if East Pakistan was given its democratic share of power. Instead of the superfluous pyrotechnics of political rivalry and 'narrow-minded provincialism', the regime promised competent economic management, steady growth, a robust state and national harmony. Its mantra was economic development.