Bangladesh Awami League

**Bangladesh Awami League** one of the oldest and major political parties in Bangladesh. It is the Awami League that played the leading role in achieving the independence of Bangladesh.

The Awami League was founded in Rose Garden of KM Das Lane, Dhaka on 23 June 1949 at a convention of the leaders and workers known to be a faction of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League headed by [huseyn shaheed suhrawardy](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Suhrawardy,_Huseyn_Shaheed" \o "Suhrawardy, Huseyn Shaheed) and [abul hashim](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Hashim,_Abul" \o "Hashim, Abul). The new party was named East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. It was established with Maulana [abdul hamid khan bhasani](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bhasani,_Maulana_Abdul_Hamid_Khan" \o "Bhasani, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan) as president, [ataur rahman khan](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Khan,_Ataur_Rahman" \o "Khan, Ataur Rahman), Sakhawat Hossain and Ali Ahmed Khan as vice-presidents, Shamsul Hoque as general secretary, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (then interned in jail), Khondakar Mostaq Ahmed and AK Rafiqul Hussain as joint secretaries, and Yar Mohammad Khan as treasurer. From the very inception the Awami League has been a secular and non-communal party. As a mark of its secular posture, the term 'Muslim' was deleted from the name of the party at its third council meeting held on 21-23 October 1955. The party believes in welfare economy. It has front organisations among the students, labourers, peasants, youths and women.

The Awami League was the first opposition party in the then Pakistan. At its birth the party adopted a 42-point programme with a special emphasis on the demand for provincial autonomy. Recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan, one man one vote, democracy, framing of a constitution, parliamentary form of government, regional autonomy and removal of disparity between the two wings had been the major demands of Awami League during the initial stage of the Pakistani rule. In the 1948-52 language movement, the Awami League and its student front, Chhatra League (est. 1948), played a vitally important role. The Awami League played a leading role in the formation of the 'All Party State Language Action Committee' in 1952 preceding the 21 February killing.

In the general elections of 1954 in East Bengal, it was the Awami Muslim League under the leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Sahrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which was instrumental in forming the electoral [united front](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=United_Front) against the government with three other opposition parties, such as Krishak Sramik Party led by AK Fazlul Huq, Nijam-e-Islam party led by Maulana Atahar Ali and Ganatantri Dal led by Haji Muhammad Danesh.'

The United Front fought the elections on the basis of a 21-point comprehensive socio-political programme of which 'the state language issue' and 'the demand for autonomy of East Bengal' are the two main planks. In the elections held on 8-12 March, the United Front scored a comprehensive victory. Out of the 237 Muslim seats the Muslim League was able to secure only 9 seats as against 223 seats. Awami League alone secured 143 bagged by the Front. All the remaining 72 general seats were captured by the allies of the United Front. During the 24 years of Pakistan, Awami League was in power in the province for only about two years (1956-1958) headed by Ataur Rahman Khan, and at the centre for 13 months (12 September 1956 to 11 October 1957) as a coalition government headed by HS Suhrawardy. The United Front partners formed the government headed by AK Fazlul Huq, in which the Awami League was the major partner. But he was dismissed within 56 days of his government. It was followed by a political instability marked by frequent dismissal of governments. But in spite of short duration, the various ministries took several important measures, which included the tackling of serious problem of food shortage, the release of the political prisoners, giving test relief to the landless peasants, the granting of financial aid to the families of language martyrs, the declaration of February 21 as a government holiday, the observance of Pohela Baisakh as Bangla New Year Day, the establishment of a veterinary College in Mymensingh, Fenchuganj Fertiliser Factory, Savar Dairy Farm and' of Film Development Corporation (FDC) in Dhaka by the Ataur Rahman Khan government. As an important member of the government holding the Ministry of Industries, Commerce and Labour, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a leading role in all these. At the centre, the Awami League government under Suhrawardy took a few important measures. These included the adoption of parity in all respects involving the two wings, the holding for the first time of the session of Pakistan National Assembly in Dhaka, the passing of an act in the National Assembly introducing joint electorate system (October 1956), the establishment of Jute Marketing Corporation, Inland Water Transport Authority (IWTA), and of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA).

In 1957, the Awami League faced a serious organisational crisis resulting in a split in the party on the issue of foreign policy. Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhasani differed fundamentally on the issue of Pakistan foreign policy. While Suhrawardy favoured strong links with the West, particularly with America, Bhasani was in favour of a non-aligned foreign policy. The division came to surface at the [kagmari conference](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Kagmari_Conference" \o "Kagmari Conference) (Tangail) of the party (7-8 February 1957). On March 18, Maulana Bhasani resigned from the Awami League and its presidentship. In the spree of resignations, Bhasani was soon followed by 9 out of 37 members of the party's working committee. This eventually led to the formation of a new party named the National Awami Party with Maulana Bhasani as its president. This took place at a conference of his supporters held at Rupmahal Cinema Hall, Dhaka, on 25-26 July 1957.

At this critical juncture, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took upon himself the rein of the organisation. He resigned from the ministerial position (31 May 1957) after serving only nine months in order to devote full time to organisation of the Awami League. Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish was made the party president.'

During General Ayub's autocratic regime (1958-1969), the Awami League under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the leading party in the struggle for achieving autonomy for East Bengal. Before his death in 1963, HS Suhrawardy organised an anti-Ayub united platform of major political parties named National Democratic Front (NDF) calling for the restoration of democracy and constitutional rule. Suhrawardy's death enabled Sheikh Mujib to become the sole leader of the Awami League. He revived the Awami League in a meeting of the central members held on 25 January 1964 at his Dhanmondi residence. In the event of a communal riot that broke out in 1964 in East Pakistan, the Awami League tried to establish communal harmony. Advocating communal harmony, the party circulated an official pamphlet titled Purba Pakistan, Rukhe Darao (East Pakistan, Stand up in Resistance). In the presidential elections held on 2 January 1965 the Awami League together with some other parties organised a united front called the Combined Opposition Party (COP) to topple the autocratic Ayub regime. The COP fielded Miss Fatema Jinnah in support of its demand for the restoration of parlimentary democracy in place of the presidential system and for the introduction of universal suffrage as opposed to Ayub's [basic democracy](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Basic_Democracies) or the indirect system of voting by an electoral college. The results of the elections were decided not by popular votes but by the 80,000 electors called Basic Democrats, and expectedly the opposition lost.'

In the aftermath of the 17-days war of 1965 between India and Pakistan that exposed the utter helplessness of the Bangalees in the absence of any noticiable military defense and security from the side of the Pakistan central government, at a conference of opposition parties in Lahore in February 1966, Sheikh Mujib presented the historic [six-point programme](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Six-point_Programme) of the Awami League. The programme included: federal parliamentary system at the centre including universal adult franchise; all power in the federating units or provinces except foreign relations and defense; separate currencies for East and West Pakistan; right of the federating units to levy taxes and duties; right to negotiate trade and commerce with foreign countries by the federating units; and finally, para-militia or para-military forces for the provinces for their own defenses.

The 6-point programme marked a shift in politics. The initial reactions at the programme were mixed and some were opposed to the idea outright. Even within the Awami League, a section was reluctant to support his six-points demand. However Shiekh Mujibur Rahman had been able to get his 6-point programme ratified through the Awami League council meeting held in Eden Hotel, Dhaka on 18-19 March 1966. Sheikh Mujib was elected as president of the party, while Tajuddin Ahmed was elected as general secretary. The 6-point programme instantly stirred the younger section of the population of the country. The reaction of the Ayub government was very sharp. Terming it 'secessionist', President Ayub threatened to suppress the demand with the 'language of weapon'. Meanwhile Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched a 3-month long mass-contact programme. He was arrested eight times during this period, finally thrown into jail on 8 May 1966. On 7 June, at the call of the Awami League a general strike was observed all over East Pakistan in support of the 6-point programme and for the release of Sheikh Mujib. The police opened fire on the crowd in Tejgoan, Tongi and Narayanganj killing 13 of them.

This was followed by large-scale arrests of the leaders and members of the Awami League throughout the country. [syed nazrul islam](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Islam,_Syed_Nazrul" \o "Islam, Syed Nazrul) and [amena begum](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Begum,_Amena" \o "Begum, Amena) took on the mantle of the party as acting president and general secretary respectively. At one stage, the Ayub government had recourse to a sort of 'final solution' in regard to the 6-point movement by instituting in 1968 a case of conspiracy against Sheikh Mujib (already in custody) and 34 other Bangalee civil-military officers, known as the [agartala conspiracy case](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Agartala_Conspiracy_Case" \o "Agartala Conspiracy Case)but officially styled as 'State virsus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others. The accused were charged with treason and conspiracy against the state of Pakistan. The measure, however, proved to be counter-productive. It led to the [mass upsurge](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Mass_Upsurge,_1969) of 1969 that forced Ayub Khan to step down from power.

In the backdrop of countrywide mass movement and fall of Ayub Khan, the country's first general election were held in December 1970 under the new military regime headed by [yahya khan](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Khan,_Aga_Mohammad_Yahya" \o "Khan, Aga Mohammad Yahya). By now, Awami League turned into a nationalist platform for the Bangalees. The party went to the polls with full vigour and enthusiasm considering the election as a virtual referendum on its Six-Point Programme. Awami League won a stunning victory in the elections bagging 160 out of 162 territorial seats (72.57% votes) in East Pakistan allotted in the central legislature. Awami League had a similar landslide victory in the Provincial Assembly elections in East Pakistan winning 288 out of 300 seats (89% votes). It also won all the 7 women seats in the National Assembly and the 10 women seats in the Provincial Assembly. It meant that the people of East Pakistan and the Awami League became identical.

Thus Awami League emerged as the single majority party in the Pakistan National Assembly with 167 seats out of a total of 313. But instead of inviting Awami League to form the government, the military junta of Yahya Khan resorted to his military machine to suppress the election verdict and the aspiration of the Bangalees. The Awami League and its chief Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called a massive [non-cooperation movement](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Non-Cooperation_Movement) in East Pakistan from 2 March (1971) onward to which the people as a whole declared their solidarity. On March 7, Bangabandhu made his historic address in Race Course Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) giving a clarion call to the Bangalee nation for an armed resistance movement against the Pakistani ruling classes now identified as enemies. He declared: 'The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation; the struggle this time is the struggle for independence.'

The attack on the unarmed Bangalees in Dhaka and other places in East Pakistan by the Pakistani army on the dreadful night of 25 March 1971 sealed the fate of Pakistan. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and flown to West Pakistan to face a so-called trial for treason. Before courting arrest in the night of 25 March 1971, the Awami League leader Bangabandu declared the Independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

The government-in-exile ([mujibnagar government](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Mujibnagar_Government" \o "Mujibnagar Government)) formed by the elected representatives of Awami League on 10 April 1971 with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as President, Syed Nazrul Islam as Vice President (to act as president in the absence of Bangabandhu) and Tajuddin Ahmed as Prime Minister led the war of liberation.

In the post-liberation Bangladesh, during the period from 1972 to 2008, the Awami League had been in government for two terms and a half, first under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-1975) and later under his daughter, [sheikh hasina](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Hasina,_Sheikh) (1996-2001). The first Awami League government had to confront the challenges of reconstruction of a war-ravaged country. Everything had to be rebuilt from the scratch. The situation was further aggravated by the large-scale possession of illegal firearms in private hands.

The most important achievements of the Awami government under Bangabandhu included introduction of parliamentary form of government; framing of a secular, democratic and progressive Constitution (1972) for independent Bangladesh within a period of ten months; the quick return of the Indian soldiers who joined the liberation war as aide to freedom fighters; winning of recognition for the new republic by 140 states of the world; and rehabilitation of 10 million refugee who had taken shelter in India and of nearly 3 lac women who were violated by the Pakistani army during the war. The holding of general elections within a period of fifteen months from liberation under the new Constitution was another achievement of the Awami League government. In the elections (March 1973), the Awami League won a comprehensive victory securing 293 out of 300 seats (73.17% votes) in the Jatiya Sangsad.

But for the Awami League government, the most telling aspects were the famine of 1974, failure to curb rampant corruption and inability to arrest the declining law and order situation. Viewed Bangladesh war of liberation as an unfinished revolution, the radical left parties had waged an undeclared war against the government. They were joined in hands by armed operatives and anti liberation forces in a clandestine manner. In a desperate bid to confront the situation, a state of emergency was declared (1974), and the [bangladesh krishak sramik awami league](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_Krishak_Sramik_Awami_League" \o "Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League) (baksal) was formed in January 1975 by replacing multi-party parliamentary democracy with a one-national party led presidential government under the fourth amendment to the Constitution. All other parties including Awami League were abolished, at least officially. The new system was also accompanied by hard laws banning newspapers excepting some government owned papers and curbing civic rights.

Taking the opportunity of these negative developments, on 15 August 1975 a band of disgruntled junior ranked army officers assassinated Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman including all his family members then present in Dhaka. Soon there came another catastrophe when four of its top ranking leaders, Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain M Mansur Ali and AHM Qamaruzzaman were killed inside the Dhaka Central Jail on 3 November 1975. Furthermore, immediately after the revival of the party (1976) under the Political Parties Regulations (PPR) as promulgated by the Martial Law government of General Ziaur Rahman, it suffered a split.

After the assassination of Bangabandhu, Bangladesh was ruled by the army for 15 fifteen years, sometimes directly, sometimes under a civilian cover. For political reasons the usurpers of the state power adopted various means to wipe out the' Awami League.'

However, Awami League had always been surviving all vicissitudes. It participated in all the presidential and parliamentary elections held during the Zia-Sattar-Ershad regimes, sometimes on its own and sometimes by forming alliances with other like minded parties. It took the polls as an opportunity to keep the party united on the one hand and fighting the political adversaries on the other. Despite many adverse circumstances created for the Awami opposition by the ruling regimes, the Awami League worked as the opposition party in the Jatiya Sangsad in the 1979 parliamentary elections in which it secured 39 seats (24.55% votes) out of 300 territorial seats. After the elections when president Ziaur Rahman brought the Fifth Constitution Amendment Bill in the Jatiya Sangsad in April 1979 to give legitimacy to his military rule covering the period 1975-1979, the Awami League opposed it tooth and nail inside and outside the Sangsad.

After six years of self exile since the 1975 August tragedy, Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu, returned home on 17 May 1981 and took the helm of the Awami League. Earlier she was elected president of the party while still abroad.'

Understanding the need for a concerted movement against military rule, the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina formed a 15-party alliance in early 1983 to fight against Ershad's military autocracy. The Alliance adopted a 5-point action programme, the main concerns of which were the immediate withdrawal of the army to the barracks and holding of the Jatiya Sangsad elections first before any other polls. At this crucial stage, the party suffered a set back. The Awami League was split into two groups in 1983. A large section of party leaders and workers loyal to the idea of Bangabandhu's Bangladesh Krishak-Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) and headed by its general secretary Abdur Razzaq refused to join the newly revived Awami League and resolved to work holding high the concept of [baksal](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=BAKSAL" \o "BAKSAL). But great majority members rallied round the Awami League headed by Sheikh Hasina. However, the majority members of the BAKSAL faction joined the mainstream of the party in 1991.

In the struggle against Ershad's military rule different professional groups were mobilised and national conventions were held. As rallying cry, the Awami League called many hartals and other forms of protestations against the autocratic regime were observed. In the interest of the restoration of democracy, the Awami League also agreed to take the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as partners. At one stage of the movement for the restoration of democracy, Husein Muhammad Ershad yielded to the opposition demand and announced the date for the holding of the Jatiya Sangsad elections on 7 May 1986.

The Awami League took elections as an opportunity to oust the autocratic regime. But, on the question of joining the elections, there was a split in the 15-Party Alliance. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led 7-Party Alliance headed by Begum Khaleda Zia pursued the line of persistent street actions against the regime, which was looked as unwise by the Awami led partners. Finally the Awami League took part in the polls in the name of 8- Party Alliance. In the elections, the Alliance secured 97 seats out of 300 and 31.21% of the votes polled (Awami League alone won 76 seats and 26.15% votes). However, along with street movement, the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina continued to play its role as the main opposition in the Sangsad until its dissolution by Ershad in December 1987. General Ershad arranged another elections on 3 March 1988 to be boycotted by most of the major parties including the Awami League. But in the midst of relentless opposition to his government, Ershad was eventually forced to declare his resignation on 4 December 1990. In the subsequent Jatiya Sangsad elections held on 27 February 1991 under a caretaker government headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP won majority seats among the parties (140 out of 300 and 30.81% votes) and formed the government. Awami League and its allies secured more votes but less seats (34.29% votes and 100 seats; Awami League itself secured 88 seats and 30.08% votes).

The Awami League took the first initiative in the reintroduction of parliamentary form of government which came into being through the Twelfth Amendment of the Constitution being effected on 6 August 1991 on the basis of consensus among the parties in the Sangsad. However, such an understanding between the government and the opposition did not last long. Soon they fell apart over the by-elections in Mirpur (Dhaka) and Magura (Jessore). The victory of relatively weak and unpopular ruling party candidates in both by-elections and the way the by-elections were conducted led the opposition to believe that no elections would be free and fair under a party government. Thus the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and in alliance with other opposition parties started a massive movement marked by boycotting Jatiya Sangsad (March-December 1994) first, then resignation from it en mass (28 December 1994) and calling recurring hartals in support of the demand for constituting a non-party caretaker government to hold the elections. The ruling BNP ignored the demand and held the general elections (15 Feb. 1996) but only to be boycotted by the Awami League and its alliance partners. The election results did not receive public support. Publicly, it was considered as a voterless election. The Jatiya Sangsad thus created lasted for only four days. Submitting to the public demand, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia conceded the demand for holding the elections by a caretaker government. With the support of the opposition, she enacted Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution providing in it the system of holding general elections by the Caretaker Government as conceived by the Awami League and then she resigned on 30 March 1996.

In the seventh Jatiya Sangsad elections held on 12 June 1996 under the caretaker government headed by Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, the Awami League won majority seats among the parties (146 seats out of 300 and 37.53% of the votes cast) and formed the government with Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister. Her government claimed to have made significant contributions in several areas. It was marked by several events including, among other things, strengthening of the Sangsad through its committees (members placed as the chiefs instead of ministers); introduction of Question-Answer hour of the Prime Minister; repeal of the 'Indemnity Act' (November 12, 1996) and thus paving the way for the trial of the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; signing of the 30-year [ganges water sharing treaty](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Ganges_Water_Sharing" \o "Ganges Water Sharing) (December 12, 1996) with India; the [chittagong hill tracts peace accord](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Chittagong_Hill_Tracts_Peace_Accord,_1997" \o "Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997) (December 2, 1997); initiatives towards empowerment of women with the provision for their direct election to the union parishad and other local government bodies; steps for the amelioration of poverty and eradication of illiteracy; social security measures for the aged, divorced women and the widows; monthly grant for the disadvantaged freedom fighters; measures for attaining self-sufficiency in food production and so on.

In the eighth Jatiya Sangsad elections held on 1 October 2001 the Awami League suffered a smashing defeat at the hands of the BNP-Jamat 4-party Alliance. Awami League secured only 62 seats and 40.13% votes as against 193 seats and 40.97% votes captured by the BNP (the 4-party Alliance combine won 216 seats and 47.05% of the votes).'

'But in spite of this reversal, Awami League Alliance came out victorious in the next elections held on 29 December 2008. It took advantage of all the limitations that Begum Khaleda Zia's government (1996-2001)had suffered from and organised massive public mobilisation to make sure its victory. The BNP alliance also tried to stay in power by all possible means regular and irregular. Under the circumstances, the law and order deteriorated to the extent that an army intervention took place making the Constitution only partially operative. The leaders of both the major parties were confined. The rumour was in the air that the army was planning to oust both the leaders, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina from the national politics. This plan, what came to be known as 'Minus Two' formula proved to be too ambitious for the army backed government to be implemented.

Although a new caretaker government was installed with Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former governor of the Bangladesh Bank, as Chief Advisor, the army headed by General Moeen U Ahmed held the real string of power. They seemed to have contemplated a plan to stay on in power for a longer period but in vain. The arrest of the two top leaders (Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia) and their trial in special tribunal on charges of corruptions; the 'minus two formula' to oust them permanently from politics; so-called democratic reforms proposed to be made within the political parties; large scale arrests of political, business and professional leaders; formation of a pro-regime party (Progressive Democratic Party), all were make-believe measures only perpetuate the army backed rule. But eventually the Sangsad elections were held on 29 December 2008 with the participation of both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia. The Awami League-led Alliance won a huge victory securing 262 seats out of 300 and 55.85% of the votes polled (Awami League alone won 230 seats with 48.29% votes).

The Awami League-led government was formed on 6 January 2009 with Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister. The most traumatic experience of the new government was the bloody BDR mutiny that took place within 3 weeks of the formation of the government. The Government managed the post-mutiny developments to the satisfaction of the people. The other early measures taken by the Awami League government included constituting all the 37 parliamentary Committees giving, for the first time, chairmanships of these committees to parliamentary members, completing the trial of 5 killers of the Father of the Nation as per final verdict of the court; beginning of the process of trial of the 1971 war criminals; curbing the Islamic militants and other operatives; framing a national education policy; restoring the 1972 Constitution and some other important measures. [Harun-or-Rashid]