

Introduction: The Bengal Provincial Election of 1954

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). The elections of 1954 were also the first elections ever in the Bengal delta on the basis of a universal adult franchise.

Formation of the United Front

United Front was an alliance of the opposition political parties to contest the East Bengal Legislative Assembly elections between 8-12 March 1954.

The decision to form a United Front was initially endorsed on 14 November 1953 in the council session of the Awami Muslim League in Mymensingh. Subsequently, it emerged as an effective political platform to unite diverse political groups in East Bengal.

The coalition consisted of:

1. Awami Muslim League,
2. Krishak Praja Party,
3. Ganatantri Dal (Democratic Party)
4. and Nizam-e-Islam

United Front was led by three major Bengali populist leaders-

1. K. Fazlul Huq,
2. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and
3. Maulana Bhashani

Results of 1954 Elections

The election result surprised everyone as the United Front won the absolute majority. In total, United Front won 215 seats out of 237 Muslim seats. On the other hand, the ruling Muslim League got only 9 seats. All 5 Ministers of the Muslim League Ministry including the Chief Minister Nurul Amin were defeated.

Factors contributed to the success of the United Front

There were many reasons behind the enormous success of the United Front in the elections of 1954. Some of those are discussed below.

Postponements of the elections

The general elections to the East Bengal legislative assembly due in 1951 could not be held until 1954. Several postponements of the elections under various pretexts only proved malicious motives, organizational weaknesses and vulnerability of the ruling party.

Failure of the Muslim League

- The party got detached from the mass people since 1947.
- Many dedicated leaders and workers left ML to form new parties.
- Muslim League was responsible for the disparity between East and West Pakistan.
- Economy of East Bengal deteriorated during 1947-1954.
- Prices of essential commodities rose sharply.

Causes behind the United Front formation:

- During the early period of Pakistan, East Bengal witnessed economic disparity between the two wings.
- Poor representation of the people of East Bengal in the government and administration.
- Politico-cultural repression pursued by the ruling elites of Pakistan.
- Deprivation of Bengalis from due participation in decision-making process.

All these led to politics of regionalism in East Bengal and political forces of East Bengal gradually pushed to launch new political platforms.

Manifesto of the United Front

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.

The aftermath of the victory

The election result was a signal to the end of the dominance of the national elite in the politics of East Bengal. A vast majority of the elected members were new, relatively young and inexperienced in government and politics.

However, within a year or so after the election, the United Front disintegrated because of clashes of personalities, intra-alliance disagreements and dissension, and divergent party program.

Conclusion

The elections of 1954 were won by the United Front and its style of politics has dominated politics in the Bengal delta ever since. This style is best described as mobilizing the street: it depends heavily on drumming up popular support by means of fiery speeches delivered at enormous public rallies, organizing protest marches and general strikes and issuing political manifestos.