

The formation of the United Front and evaluating the factors that led to the success of the United Front in the 1954 Election

United Front an alliance of the opposition parties to contest seats in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly elections held 8-12 March 1954. The result was a comprehensive victory for the alliance or front composed mainly of four parties of East Bengal, namely AWAMI LEAGUE, Krishak Sramik Party, Nizam-e-Islam, and Ganatantri Dal.

The Front campaigned on an election manifesto that incorporated a package of TWENTY-ONE adopted by the Front in November 1953. In addition to full regional autonomy, the manifesto demanded that the central government should delegate to the eastern province all subjects except defense, foreign affairs, and currency. It also called for recognition of Bangla as a state language, release of political prisoners, transformation of the then official residence (Burdwan House) of the chief minister of East Bengal into Bangla Academy, construction of Shaheed Minar at the site of the police firing in 1952, declaration of 21 February as a public holiday, more autonomy for Dhaka and Rajshahi universities, introduction of economic and social rights for industrial workers in keeping with the principles of ILO, nationalization of jute, guarantee of fair prices for commodities, and public support for cooperatives and cottage industries.

During the early period of Pakistan, economic disparity, poor representation of Bengalis in government, and politico-cultural repression pursued by the ruling elite of Pakistan accentuated political problems in East Bengal. Most importantly, the deprivation of Bangladeshis from due participation in the decision-making process gave rise to the politics of regionalism in East Bengal. The resultant development was that the political forces of East Bengal were gradually pushed to launch new political platforms and organize movements against the central government based in the western part of the country.

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, MUSLIMS. The United Front reflective of all shades of the political spectrum in the province emerged mainly due to the failure of the Muslim League as a ruling party, and other historical, political, and economic reasons. The decision to form a united front was initially endorsed on 14 November 1953 at the historic council session of the Awami League at Mymensingh. Subsequently, the Front for a while dominated the political landscape of East Bengal and had its usefulness as an effective political platform to unite diverse political groups.

The United Front won 223 seats out of 309 Muslim seats in the assembly, whereas the ruling Muslim League managed to capture only 9 seats, and all five members of the Muslim League Ministry including the chief minister (Nurul Amin), were defeated. As many as 1285 candidates contested in the election held based on adult franchise. In all 986 candidates contested for 228 Muslim seats, 101 candidates for 30 general seats, and 151 candidates for 36 scheduled caste seats. The Pakistan National Congress, the United Progressive Party, and the Schedule Caste Federation were the main contenders for the non-Muslim seats, 37 candidates contested for 9 seats reserved for Muslim women. The United Front candidates captured all the seats reserved for the women.

For Muslim constituencies, the turnout of voters was 37.6 percent. Although low by contemporary international standards, the turnout seemed considerable given the inadequate communication facilities, and the poor turnout of the women voters because of the prevailing conservative outlook in the society. For some reason, communists did not campaign under their party banner but preferred to contest as nominees of the United Front; 15 seats were won by them.

The resultant development after the election was that the United Front leader, AK FAZLUL HUQ, was invited on 3 April 1954 by the provincial governor to form the government. Importantly, however, the election result was a signal to the end of the dominance of the national elite in the politics of East Bengal; landowners had given away to a younger generation of professional university-trained elite, comprising lawyers, journalists, teachers, and businessmen. A vast majority of the elected members were new, relatively young, and inexperienced in government and politics. Out of the 223 members elected under the United Front banner, 130 belonged to the Awami League.

The United Front campaigned on a 21-point election manifesto that spoke for recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan, abolition of the zamindari system, nationalizing jute trade, introduction of cooperative farming, rehabilitation of refugees, flood control, modernizing agriculture, reforming the education system, rescinding all black laws, rationalizing the pay scales, eradication of corruption, separating judiciary from the executive, erection of a monument in memory of language martyrs, converting Burdwan House into a Bangla language development institute, declaring 21 February as Shaheed Day and a public holiday, and establishment of full provincial autonomy. Leaders like AK Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhasani, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman put up these popular demands. With the support of left political workers, the United Front leaders could operate with considerable ease at the grassroots level. The United Front could fully exploit issues like the killing of students on 21 February 1952, and the ever-rising prices of essential goods, particularly salt and rice. The large-scale detention of opposition political workers also made the people suspicious of the intentions of the Muslim League.

The United Front's victory proved illusory long before the euphoria wore out. On March 25, East Pakistan governor Choudhury Khaliquzzaman asked Krishak Sramik Party leader AK Fazlul Huq to form the ministry. But in the ministry formed on 3 April, the Awami Muslim League was left out. This created a crisis in the Front, and Fazlul Huq was obliged to expand his cabinet on May 15 to include Abul Mansur Ahmed, Ataur Rahman Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Abdus Salam Khan and Hashimuddin. The same day a serious riot between the Bangali and non-Bangali workers of the Adamjee Jute Mills at Narayanganj caused the death of nearly 1500 workers. The communist activists were held responsible for the tragedy, and the Fazlul Huq government was blamed for its failure in controlling the situation. On May 30, the ministry was dismissed and the direct governor's rule was imposed. Around 1600 Front leaders and workers, including 30 members of the legislature, were put behind bars. The Awami League, however, returned to power on its own on 30 August 1956 with Ataur Rahman Khan as chief minister, but only to resign a few months later.

United Front (East Pakistan)

The **United Front** was a coalition of political parties in East Bengal that contested and won Pakistan's first provincial general election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly. The coalition consisted of the Awami Muslim League, the Krishak Praja Party, the Ganatantri Dal (Democratic Party), and Nizam-e-Islam. The coalition was led by three major Bengali populist leaders- A. K. Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Maulana Bhashani. The election resulted in a crushing defeat for the Muslim League. The veteran student leader of East Pakistan Khaleque Nawaz Khan defeated the sitting Prime Minister of East Pakistan Mr. Nurul Amin in the Nandail Constituency of Mymensingh district and created history in the political arena. Nurul Amin's crushing defeat to a 27-year-old young Turk of United Front effectively eliminated the Muslim League from the political landscape of the then East Pakistan. United Front parties secured a landslide victory and gained 223 seats in the 309-member assembly. The Awami League emerged as the majority party, with 143 seats.

A. K. Fazlul Huq of the Krishak Praja Party became Chief Minister of East Pakistan upon the victory of the United Front. The election propelled popular Bengali leaders into the Pakistani federal government, with leaders such as Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Abul Mansur Ahmed becoming key federal ministers. In the provincial government, young leaders such as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Yusuf Ali Chowdhury, and Khaleque Nawaz Khan rose to prominence.

The United Front demanded greater provincial autonomy for East Pakistan. It passed a landmark order for the establishment of the Bangla Academy in Dhaka. However, within weeks of assuming power, the newly elected provincial legislature was dismissed by Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad, upon accusations against A K Fazlul Huq of attempting secession. The dismissal of the United Front was a key turning point in aggravating East Pakistan's grievances in the Pakistani union and led Maulana Bhashani to openly call for separation and independence in 1957, in his *Salaam, Pakistan* (Farewell, Pakistan) speech.

Twenty-One Point Programme

Twenty-One Point Programme objectives were incorporated in the election manifesto of the United Front, an alliance of the opposition political parties, to contest elections of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1954 against the then party in power, the Muslim League. The United Front was composed of four political parties of East Bengal, namely Awami Muslim League, Krishak Sramik Party, Nezam-e-Islam, and Ganatantri Dal. The Front was formed on 4 December 1953 by the initiative of AK Fazlul Huq of Krishak Sramik Party, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy of Awami Muslim League.

The 21-point package program in the election manifesto adopted by the United Front runs as follows:

1. To recognize Bangla as one of the State Languages of Pakistan;
2. To abolish without compensation zamindari and all rent-receiving interest in land, and to distribute the surplus lands amongst the cultivators; to reduce the rent to a fair level and abolish the certificate system of realizing rent;
3. To nationalize the jute trade and bring it under the direct control of the government of East Bengal, secure the fair price of jute to the growers and investigate the jute-bungling during the Muslim League regime to punish those found responsible for it;
4. To introduce co-operative farming in agriculture and to develop cottage industries with full government subsidies;
5. To start a salt industry (both small and large scale) to make East Bengal self-sufficient in the supply of salt, and to investigate the salt-bungling during the Muslim League regime to punish the offenders;

6. To rehabilitate immediately all the poor refugees belonging to the artisan and technician class;
7. To protect the country from flood and famine using digging canals and improving irrigation system;
8. To make the country self-sufficient by modernizing the method of cultivation and industrialization, and to ensure the rights of the laborer as per the ILO Convention;
9. To introduce free and compulsory primary education throughout the country and to arrange for just pay and allowances to the teachers;
10. To restructure the entire education system, introduce mother tongue as the medium of instruction, remove discrimination between government and private schools, and turn all the schools into government-aided institutions;
11. To repeal all reactionary laws including those of the Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities and to make them autonomous institutions; to make education cheaper and easily available to the people;
12. To curtail the cost of administration and to rationalize the pay scale of high and low-paid government servants. The ministers shall not receive more than 1000 taka as monthly salary;
13. To take steps to eradicate corruption, nepotism, and bribery, and with this end in view, to take stocks of the properties of all government officers and businessmen from 1940 onward and forfeit all properties the acquisition of which is not satisfactorily accounted for;
14. To repeal all Safety and Preventive Detention Acts and release all prisoners detained without trial, and try in open court persons involved in anti-state activities; to safeguard the rights of the press and of holding meetings;
15. To separate the judiciary from the executive;
16. To locate the residence of the chief minister of the United Front at a less costly house, and to convert Burdwan House into a student's hostel now, and later, into an institute for research on Bangla language and literature;
17. To erect a monument in memory of the martyrs of the Language Movement on the spot where they were shot dead, and to pay compensation to the families of the martyrs;
18. To declare 21 February as 'Shaheed Day' and a public holiday;
19. The Lahore Resolution proposed full autonomy of East Bengal leaving defense, foreign affairs, and currency under the central government. In the matter of defense, arrangements shall be made to set the headquarters of the army in West Pakistan and the naval headquarters in East Bengal to establish ordnance factories in East Bengal, and transform the Ansar force into a full-fledged militia equipped with arms;
20. The United Front Ministry shall on no account extend the tenure of the Legislature and shall resign six months before the general elections to facilitate free and fair elections under an Election Commission;
21. All casual vacancies in the Legislature shall be filled up through by-elections within three months of the vacancies, and if the nominees of the Front are defeated in three successive by-elections, the ministry shall resign from office.

In the elections of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held in March 1954, the United Front won 223 seats out of 237 Muslim seats, whereas the ruling Muslim League managed to bag only 9 seats.