

THE ELECTION OF 1970

After over a decade-long suspension of normal political processes under Ayub Khan's coup in 1958, the pivotal year of 1970 brought about the democratization of politics in Pakistan. The country's first-ever general elections since its independence resulted in the emergence of two regional parties – the Awami League in East Pakistan and Pakistan's People's Party in the West. Although the results of this election indicated a clear victory for the Awami League, which won a majority of 160 seats, political and military institutions in the West refused to concede or negotiate the possibility of transferring power. I believe it is this factor which directly provoked and led to the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. It was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's conclusive win in the 1970 elections, which caused the 'vision of independent national sovereignty to become politically dominant for the first time'.

Firstly, it is important to understand why the Awami League were advocating for their independence. Although Bengalis played a critical role in the making of Pakistan, they were systematically marginalized by discriminatory policies and ideologies of the government. As former Pakistani President Musharraf writes, the 'main themes of the discontent were economic disparities between eastern and western Pakistan, the concentration of wealth in 22 families, an acute sense of deprivation and alienation in East Pakistan'. This paved the way for Rahman's 'six-point movement' – often described as a "charter of freedom" for Bengalis which demanded the immediate implementation of 6 policies: removal and separation of paramilitary forces, two separate currencies and more. However, after his victory in the 1970's elections, the six points turned into one demand: the establishment of Bangladesh. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's failure to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power and Rahman's strong stance on safeguarding his democratic rights left the country divided. President Yahya took this opportunity to initiate 'Operation Searchlight' and arrested Mujibur Rahman in March 1971 to stem the growth of nationalist sentiments in the East. The army justified their violence by highlighting the persecution of ethnic Urdu speakers in the Eastern wing, who opposed the independence movement. Aiming to regain control and authority, Pakistan's army proceeded with widespread systematic killings, genocidal rape and displacing up to 30 million within the country. India soon after allied with East Pakistan and took up the task of training their soldiers to sabotage the West's military and economic assets. In December 1971, the nine-month conflict ended with the surrender of Pakistan's military and the formation of a new nation-state, leaving 300,000 to 3 million Bengalis dead and hundreds of thousands of non-Bengalis dead before the military intervention. The birth of Bangladesh changed the geopolitical landscape of South Asia and also became the grounds for further Cold War tensions due to regional alliances with states like the USA, Soviet Union and China. The aftermath of the war left Bangladesh's economy crippled; virtually all business funds were remitted to the West and much of the capital stock and infrastructure was destroyed. The heavy floods that followed the disastrous war contributed to the famine of 1974. Whilst India declined to assist any further, 1.5 million Bengalis died from starvation, cholera, malaria or diarrheic diseases. In short, the war of 1971 was not a minor event either by absolute or relative measures. The war of independence may have officially lasted nine months, but it plunged Bangladesh into years of loss and calamity – something the warring parties failed to foresee.

To reiterate my point, Pakistan's decision to hold an election after decades of military rule and their subsequent failure to negotiate the transfer of power caused the war of 1971 - ultimately partitioning the country in two. The absence of the 1970's election would mean Yahya Khan's military dictatorship would continue and he would have withheld from introducing basic elements of democracy. Yahya's reinstatement of 1956's constitution – which was abandoned by his predecessor – would have allowed both East and West Pakistan to reach a consensus. In the absence of the elections, the constitution would bring in provisions for equal status of both wings in government jobs, armed forces and administration. It is important to note that before the elections of 1971, although economic disparities between East and West Pakistan were points of concern, the leadership of the East did not wish for an independent status for Bangladesh. Mujibur Rahman's six-point manifesto advocating for economic and political autonomy for the Bengali people called for two separate foreign exchange accounts, independent regulation for taxes, and removal of Pakistan's military from Bengal's borders. Although these demands may initially seem quite aggressive and threatening to West Pakistan, Rahman had told Yahya these six points were not the 'Koran or Bible' and were negotiable. He further assured the media 'Pakistan will remain strong and united... our programme is not directed against the people of West Pakistan... it has never been'. Thus, from this, it is clear that in the absence of the elections, East Pakistan's leadership were more willing to compromise and negotiate with Pakistan's government.

General Yahya Khan had attempted to reform the system's inherent inequalities. A year before the elections, in 1970, fiscal budget announcements included increased investments for East Pakistan and concessional tax rates for East-wing investors. He also announced a new labour policy which lifted a 'ten-year-old ban on strikes... and declared a new minimum wage scale'. All these reforms, in line with the reinstatement of the constitution, represented the willingness of the government to consider the 'disestablishment of West Pakistan' and looked promising for the future of Bengal. If Yahya had not dramatically called for the elections, he could have continued to restore constitutional rights; attempting to reconstruct a system which was never built for the majority. It is clear that from the beginning, the system had alienated its Eastern wing – with language playing a key role in this. Although more Pakistani people spoke Bangla than Urdu, Jinnah refused to recognize Bangla as a national language. Bangla was deemed not 'Islamic' enough for the state of Pakistan manifesting concerns about cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity amongst Bengalis. The push for denying them their identity and the increasing influence of a minority group over a majority undeniably 'marked a psychological rupture'.

Therefore, I am not denying the inevitability of the creation of an independent Bangladesh, but only suggesting that the war of 1971 could have been avoided in the absence of 1970's elections. It was the unforeseen results of the elections which 'sparked popular uprisings...and tens of thousands assembled...to demand that Sheikh Mujibur immediately declare independent national sovereignty'. The abrogation of representative democracy meant that Bengalis were no longer willing to compromise with anything less than having democracy respected. The military feeling threatened resorted to violence and plunged the country into war – violating, slaughtering and perpetrating innumerable horrors on their population. The Bengalis knew all too well, Jinnah's ideal of justice, liberty and equality did not manifest or apply to them at all from the very establishment of Pakistan.