

Agartala Case of 1968: A Conspiracy or Not

When Ayub came into power in 1958 the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had full and exclusive jurisdiction in matters having to do with military intelligence and counter intelligence. It had a Civil Intelligence Bureau but it was a mirror adjunct to the ISI. During the Ayub regime it became more active in providing Ayub with political intelligence. The ISI had tarnished its reputation during the 1965 war by failing to anticipate Indian military moves and by providing inaccurate estimate of the strength and deployment of the Indian forces. In its efforts to rehabilitate its reputation the ISI thought it had hit the jackpot' when it stumbled upon a separatist plot with the armed forces of Pakistan in late 1967. Yahya Khan, the new C-in-C of the Pakistan Army, had justifiable grounds to take suitable legal action against the conspirators. Even so, he was not satisfied with the notion of punishing the guilty alone. He sensed a chance to discredit and undo the movement for Six Points, the root of all evil. If the arrested conspirators could be induced or pressed to testify falsely that the plot had the backing of India and that Mujib was personally involved in it, the popular support behind the Six Points would vanish. Extreme punishment for Mujib and the actual ringleaders of the plot by a tribunal composed of hand picked judges would silence the clamour for autonomy, perhaps for ever. Having conceived his master-plan, Yahya now proceeded to implement it.

All of the arrested persons were held incommunicado. All of them were subjected to harsh interrogation of the type common in police states. They had to undergo torture and various forms of pressure by military interrogators to extract information from them and more important, to induce them to sign false confessions. The main aim of the confessions was to implicate Mujib in the conspiracy.

The so-called Agartala conspiracy case had been concocted for the purpose of destroying the prestige of Mujib as a political leader. The ruling elite in Pakistan, instead of handling the political programme of Awami League politically, responded violently. Earlier mentioned, Ayub Khan branded the Six-Point Programme as 'secessionist' and accused Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of waging a 'civil war' in Pakistan.

The Agartala Case and the Consequences

On 6 January, 1968 the Ayub regime throw a political bombshell when it issued a statement that 28 people had been arrested on the charge of

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conspiring to secede East Pakistan from Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was already imprisoned was falsely implicated in the Agartala Conspiracy Case as the principal accused on 18 January 1968. The statement alleged that the accused persons engaged in conspiracy met Mr. P. N Ojha (first secretary of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka) and visited Agartala in India to discuss plans with two Indian officers. The government initialed the case against 35 person included a naval officer, three senior civil servants and a number of junior military personnel along with Sheikh Mujib.

It was inconceivable to Yahya that Mujib should be left out of picture in the great show trial he had in mind for the secessionist conspirators, since it was Mujib who was the driving force behind the movement for Six Points. He instructed the military interrogators to get the arrested alleged conspirators to implicate Mujib in their plot by hook and by crook. Unable to withstand the terrible torture inflicted on them, most of them signed confessions to that effect. The ground was thus prepared for Mujib to be put on trial for the alleged conspiracy.

The prosecution statement alleged that the accused were involved in "a conspiracy to deprive Pakistan of a part of its territories by an armed revolt, with weapons, ammunition and funds provided by India, and to establish their own independent government recognised by India." Mujib was a leader of the conspiracy and had personally given money to the conspirators in pursuance of their objectives. He had convened a meeting of the conspirators on 12 March 1966 at the home of Tajuddin only a few weeks before he was arrested and taken into custody on a charge unrelated to the conspiracy. Ruhul Quddus was present at this meeting, among others. The other conspirators carried on with their activities in connection with the conspiracy. Their main point of action was "to capture the armouries of military units in commando-style operations, creating political difficulties by propaganda etc." The meeting with the representatives of India took place at "AGARTALA" in India on 12 July 1967. The activities of the conspirators ended with the arrest of a number of them in December 1967.

It soon became evident why the place-name Agartala was written in block letters in the prosecution statement. Although the official title of the case was "State vs. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others" the government wanted to highlight the main thrust of its accusation namely, that the separatist conspiracy led by Mujib, No 1 in the list of the accused, had the full backing of India, Pakistan's mortal enemy. So the government-owned Press

Trust newspapers — twenty one in all — adopted a new name for the case: The Agartala Conspiracy Case. Other newspapers were informally told to follow this example.

Interestingly, the government had been unable to discover the fact that Mujib himself had gone to Agartala in early 1963 in a vain attempt to get the support of India for a political struggle for the independence of East Pakistan. But all this had remained unknown to the government because the handful of people who knew about it guarded their silence. In fact, they remained tight-lipped well after the independence of Bangladesh.

The trial of the case "State vs Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others" started on 19 June 1968 in a *Bangalow* within the Dhaka cantonment. The supporters of Sheikh Mujib arranged a renewed Queen's Counsel of the English bar, Thomas Williams (Later Sir Thomas), to defend Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. As the defendants were accused of "plotting to deprive Pakistan of its sovereignty over a part of its territory by an armed revolt with weapons, ammunitions and funds provided by India," they all pleaded "not guilty." The Agartala Conspiracy Case was a sheer foolhardy on the part of Ayub Khan as it made Sheikh Mujib into a phenomenon in Pakistan.

The evidence submitted by the prosecution was so full of inaccuracies and inconsistencies that any fair-minded person was bound to conclude that it had been fabricated. It also became clear that the case had failed to achieve its objectives and indeed had become counter-productive. But once the machinery of legal process had been set in motion it became almost impossible to stop it. Even if Ayub realised that it was in his interest to drop it, he could not afford to do so when the Army insisted that its case was on strong grounds. As the proceedings dragged on month after month there was mounting dissatisfaction outside the courtroom among the general public leaflets were distributed demanding an end to the trial and there were scattered anti-regime strikes and demonstrations.

Ayub Khan made an announcement that he would not contest the next presidential election. The agitation against the Agartala Conspiracy Case was very severe. On 10 August, 1968, a strike was called throughout East Pakistan against the recommendations of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report on Education. The celebrations of 'A Decade of Reforms' launched by the supporters of Ayub Khan came to an end in October 1968. From 8 November, there had been strikes and rioting, which had serious effects upon the public services, education, commerce and industry. Economically 1968 proved to be a bad year for East Pakistan as it

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lost 1,000,000 tons of rice by floods and registered an absolute decline in the province's per capita income. On 26 November, 1968, S. M. Murshed (Former Chief Justice of East Pakistan) joined the movement against Ayub Khan, as Air Marshall Asgar Khan started in West Pakistan. At a public meeting in Dhaka on 15 December, 1968, both Justice Murshed and Air Marshall Asgar Khan announced their full support for legitimizing their interests of both East and West Pakistan. The demonstrations, which had been confined so far to West Pakistan, spread to East Pakistan when the NAP called a general strike in Dhaka.

The hearing of the Agartala Conspiracy Case continued and no solid evidence of a Mujib-Indian conspiracy that had an Independent Bangladesh as its objective has yet emerged, even in the post-1971 period, during which Pakistan could have produced such proof without any serious political consequences, domestic or international. However, students were the first to protest for the withdrawal of the case and demand for the release of all political prisoners. Thus, it was the students uprising that gave rise to the mass upsurge in 1968-69 as a result of which President Ayub had to drop the Agartala Conspiracy Case and call a Round Table Conference of all political parties in order to solve the political problems of the country.

Sheikh Mujb was released from the Agartala Conspiracy Cast and invited to the Round Table Conference in Rawalpindi. On 11 March, 1969 he attended the Conference. The conference failed as it could not accommodated the demands of the Bengali autonomists. The popular movement continued with greater speed and fury and took a more violent turn in mid-February which ultimately toppled the Ayub regime in March 1969.

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Mass Upheaval of 1969 and the fall of Ayub

By autumn 1968 opposition to the ailing president had appeared throughout the West and East. The movement which was so long student-dominated and spread to