

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 08

Formation of United Front, Election of 1954 & The Constitution of 1956



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United Front

- **United Front** an alliance of the opposition parties to contest seats in the elections to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held between 8-12 March 1954.
- The major partners of the Front were the Awami Muslim League led by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, the Krishak Sramik Party led by AK Fazlul Huq, Nezam-e-Islam led by Maulana Atahar Ali, and Ganatantri Dal led by Haji Mohammad Danesh.
- The decision to form a united front was initially endorsed on 14 November 1953 at the historic council session of the Awami League held 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 Front campaigned on an election manifesto that incorporated a package of 21-point program adopted by the Front in November 1953.


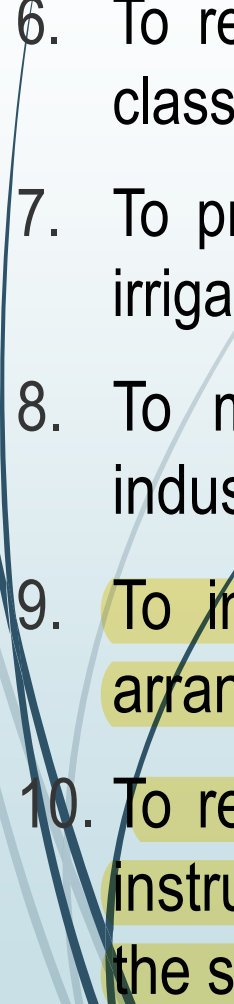
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- In addition to full regional autonomy, the manifesto demanded that the central government should delegate to the eastern province all subjects except defense, foreign affairs and currency. It also called for recognition of Bangla as a state language, 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.
- These popular demands were put up by leaders like AK Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhasani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. 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 ever rising prices of essential goods, particularly of salt and rice. The largescale detention of opposition political workers also made the people suspicious of the intentions of the Muslim League.

21-point Program

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 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 fair price of jute to the growers and to investigate into 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 salt industry (both small and large scale) in order to make East Bengal self-sufficient in the supply of salt, and to investigate into the salt-bungling during the Muslim League regime to punish the offenders;

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6. To rehabilitate immediately all the poor refugees belonging to the artisan and technician class;
 7. To protect the country from flood and famine by means of 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 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 to turn all the schools into government aided institutions;

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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;

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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 students 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 21st of 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 and to establish ordnance factories in East Bengal, and to transform 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.

Election of 1954

- Elections 1954 held in East Pakistan in March 1954 under the India Act of 1935, and based on universal adult franchise. Apart from the United Front, the other major political party was the ruling Muslim League. The United Front contested the election with the electoral symbol of boat which was one of the most typical transports of East Bengal.
- In the elections held from 8 to 12 March 1954, 1285 candidates contested for 304 seats, 5 seats having been won uncontested.
- Of them, 986 were Muslim candidates for 228 seats, 101 Hindu candidates for 30 seats, and 151 scheduled caste candidates for 36 seats. The seats for the non-Muslims were contested by candidates mainly from the Pakistan National Congress, United Progressive Party and the Scheduled Caste Federation.
- The total electors numbered 1,97,48,568 of whom 73,44,216 (37.19%) cast their votes. The lower turnout was ascribed to poor communications in rural areas and the reluctance of conservative Muslim women to come out of their houses.

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- The elections resulted in a landslide victory for the United Front which won 228 seats in a House of 309 (including nine reserved seats for women).
- On the other hand, the Muslim League, the party in power directly or indirectly ever since 1937, managed to get only 7 seats.
- Of the total of 228 elected Front members, 143 belonged to Awami Muslim League, 48 to Krishak Sramik Party, 22 to Nezam-e-Islam, 13 to Ganatantri Dal and 2 to Khilafat-e-Rabbani Party. Of the non-Muslim seats, Congress got 25, Scheduled Caste Federation 27, and the United Front of the Minorities 13.
- 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.

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- 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, Aatur Rahman Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Abdus Salam Khan and Hashimuddin Ahmed.
- The same day a serious riot between the Bangalee and non-Bengali 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 direct governor's rule was imposed instead of taking action against the criminals. Around 1600 Front leaders and workers, including 30 members of the legislature, were put behind the bars. The Awami League, however, returned to power on its own on 30 August 1956 with Aatur Rahman Khan as chief minister, but only to resign a few months later.

Constitution of 1956

- The Constitution of 1956 was the fundamental law of Pakistan from March 1956 until the 1958 Pakistani coup d'état. It was the first constitution adopted by independent Pakistan. There were 234 articles 13 parts and 6 schedules.
- Pakistan became independent of the United Kingdom in 1947 but remained a British Dominion like Canada or Australia until 1956. Under Section 8 of the Indian Independence Act, 1947, the Government of India Act 1935 with certain adaptations, served as the working constitution of Pakistan, but the need of a full independence and a constitution to be framed by the elected representatives of the people was all the more necessary for the free citizens of a sovereign state. Therefore, the first Constituent Assembly was formed under the Independence Act and was entrusted with two separate functions:
 - To frame a Constitution for the country, and
 - To set as a Federal Legislative Assembly or Parliament until that Constitution came into effect.

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- The Constitution of 1956 provided for federal system with the principle of parity between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. The Federal Legislature was to perform like the British Parliament. The Center was invested with such powers as to take unilateral action in emergency and it could influence the provincial autonomy.
- The Constitution of 1956 provided for the parliamentary form of government, where real executive authority was vested in a cabinet, collectively responsible to the legislature. The cabinet was presided over by the Prime Minister.
- The Constitution declared that there would be only one house of parliament known as the National Assembly and equality between the two Wings (i.e. East Pakistan and West Pakistan) was maintained in it.
- The Governor General was replaced by a President, who was to be elected by the Electoral College of Pakistan composed of members of the National Assembly and Provincial Assembly.

Salient Features

- **Written Constitution:** This is a written and lengthy document.
- **Rigid Constitution:** The constitution could be amended through a process requiring the amendment to be passed by at least a two-thirds majority of the parliament. However the president had the right to veto the draft, which then could be overridden by simple parliamentary majority.
- **Islamic Republic of Pakistan:** The name of the country was adopted as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
- **Federal System:** The constitution provides for a federal system in the country. Powers were divided between the center and the provinces. The subjects were divided into three lists; The Federal List, The Provincial List, and the Concurrent List.
- **Unicameral Legislature:** The legislature would consist of a single house. Both the wings of the country were given representation in the National Assembly. The National Assembly consisted of 300 members. 150 members were drawn from each wing.
- **Parliamentary System:** A parliamentary system was adopted. According to it, President was the Head of State and the Prime Minister was the Head of Government.

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- **The President:** required to be a Muslim of at least forty years of age. The tenure of his office was five years. In case of internal or external danger he could declare a state of emergency in the country. He was authorized to appoint the Governors, the Judges of the Supreme Court, Auditor General and the Advocate General. President had the power to summon, prorogue, and dissolve the Assembly on the advice of the cabinet. No bill imposing taxes or involving expenditure could be moved without his consent. He had partial veto power. He could give or withhold his assent to a bill passed by the Assembly.
- **The Prime Minister:** He was to be the leader of the Parliamentary group and was thus indirectly elected by the people. He could choose his cabinet from the members of the National Assembly; the cabinet was answerable to the Assembly.
- **Islamic Law:** No law would be passed against the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah and existing laws would be made Islamic in character.
- **Independent Judiciary:** An independent judiciary in the country. A Supreme Court interpreted the constitution, advised the state whenever required, and decided the issues whenever required.
- **Fundamental Rights:** Included freedom of movement, freedom of speech and expression, freedom to choose profession and freedom to profess religion. Right to life, liberty, and property.
- **Language:** Urdu & Bengali

Drawbacks

- The Bengalis were underrepresented in the National Assembly.
- The provisional autonomy was not given to provinces, and their demands were tried to be crushed by 'One Unit Scheme'.
- The first step towards institutionalizing army into politics was taken by giving the president the right to declare emergency at a time of so-called internal or external danger.