

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 14

Aftermath of Electoral Result: Power Transfer, Military Build UP & Session of National Assembly



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Electoral Result & Fear of Power Transfer

- The results of the elections carried a very simple message—there would be no more exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan. The bureaucracy and the military could no longer play a balancing role between equally poor and widely divided multiplicity of political parties. Stability in the democratic process could no longer be disturbed. This was the death-knell for conspiracy-prone politics in the country. The Awami League had not only obtained a majority of seats in East Pakistan but also turned out to be the party with an absolute majority in the National Assembly. Their constitutional program received a clear and unanimous approval in the East Pakistan.
- Awami League's rival PPP got only half of what AL got and many other parties of West Pakistan like National Awami Party of Wali Khan, Council Muslim League, Pakistan Democratic Party and a good number of uncommitted members were ready to support AL.
- However, the surprise and disappointment of the power elites was huge. The resentment and annoyance in consequence was monumental. As late as October 1970 Yahya's Home Minister, whose ministry was responsible for all civil intelligence work in the country, thought that AL would win about 60% of seats of East Pakistan in the National Assembly. Military intelligence sources, West Pakistani intellectuals as well as foreign diplomatic missions also made the same speculation. The power brokers were not ready for a total victory of Awami League. Thus, they needed to time to be able to dictate terms to people of East Pakistan.

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- Since the result is clear and no deadlock is there, it had to be created elsewhere before the Assembly could be called for session. Somehow the exercise of power by the Bangalees had to be retrained if not stopped altogether.
- Bhutto whose position on regional autonomy was rather vague had a limitless lust for power. He had good links with the military because of his anti-India and pro-China position. He also had a dedicated following in the bureaucracy. He spearheaded the campaign to nullify the electoral verdict.
- From the experience of 1968-69, the military knew that the only way they could strike was by creating political conflict in the country. If a wedge could be driven between the AL and some powerful party or parties of West Pakistan, they could seize the opportunity to nullify the democratic process once again. Bhutto provided the necessary opening. On 20 December 1970, he declared that his party could not be forced to sit in the opposition benches. He claimed a share of power in the central government on the ground that his party had won comfortably in Sind and the Punjab which were the “bastions (fortress) of power” in the country.
- Four days later he spoke of two majority parties in the country—his in West Pakistan and Awami League in East Pakistan. He demanded a share in the government based on the theory of Two Majority Party.

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- While Bhutto was making a campaign against the 6-point Program, other West Pakistanis were active in a quiet and sinister way. Intellectuals, bureaucrats, journalists and Pakistani diplomats were vehemently opposing the idea of a national government run by the AL and its two jobs—foreign affairs and defense. They began to campaign that Mujib was not serious about the 6-point and needed to come to terms with Bhutto by sharing power. It was also campaigned that the Pakistani Army was not ready to accept the 6-point Program.
- Yahya Khan held discussions with Mujib on 12 and 13 January 1971 and expressed his concern for the defense budget and sought assurance for sufficient federal funds to meet military commitments. Prior to his departure from Dhaka on 14 January 1971 he declared Mujib as the future Prime Minister of Pakistan. He also stated that he was satisfied with his discussions. He went to Sind and had meeting with Bhutto on 17 January 1971 and General Hamid and Major General Peerzada joined them there. Bhutto flew to Dhaka on 27 January and had meetings with Mujib for three days.
- On 30 January 1971 after a three-day meeting with Mujib in Dhaka, Bhutto declared that obstacles to constitution-making were not impossible, but he needed time to consult with his constituents about acceptability of the 6-point Program. He admitted that whereas the AL had a clear mandate from the people, his party had no clear position on this issue.
- The strategy of coercion as well as political bribery were being followed to make AL flexible about 6-point program and to agree to share power with Bhutto.

Hijacking of Indian Plane

- On 30 January 1971, two Kashmiri Muslims hijacked an Indian Fokker plane to Lahore. This was welcomed as an act of valor and patriotism by West Pakistan on one voice. Bhutto visited Lahore airport on 31 January and spoke with the hijackers who let off the crew and the passengers. On 2 February, the plane was blown up amidst jubilation in West Pakistan. The Pakistan government denied to send them back to India on the same day. The following day Bhutto justified the action of the hijackers and demanded political asylum for them.
- India in reply disallowed air-corridor for Pakistani military aircrafts on 3 February 1971 and the next day also banned the overflight of Indian territories by Pakistani commercial aircrafts. India demanded return of the hijackers to India, formal apology from Pakistan for the incident and compensation for the destroyed plane.
- Sheikh Mujib sensed political danger in the incident and he condemned the blowing up of the plane and warned. He called for an enquiry into the incident. While in West Pakistan Mujib was criticized for his views, in East Pakistan a number of other parties and student groups supported him.
- Yahya also turned down Mujib's demand for an enquiry in February but agreed to it in early March.

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- The commission carried out its task when martial law was in full effect, dissent was being mercilessly suppressed and brutal and bloody suppression of the Bangalees was going on. The commission was composed of all West Pakistani members and it submitted the report in mid-April 1971.
- It concluded that the hijacking of the Indian plane was arranged by India herself to find an excuse to ban overflight by Pakistani aircrafts to East Pakistan. Yahya alleged that the Awami League had conspired to separate East Pakistan from West Pakistan through an armed uprising with the help of India.
- To prove this charge there had to be some evidence. And the report of the enquiry commission was supposed to fabricate one piece of evidence at least.

Military Build Up

- After the 1965 war, Pakistan expanded its war machine. When Yahya Khan took power, building up of military hardware especially arms and equipment for army went on very rapidly. In December 1969, the foreign exchange reserves of Pakistan stood at \$323 million and in January 1971 it fell to \$184 million. Only logical explanation of such nose-dive of reserve was the large-scale military spending by Yahya regime. With the cyclone relief operations, the military increased its strength in East Pakistan to meet any crisis. In the meantime, war preparations dominated the military scene in Pakistan beginning February 1971. massive ferrying of troops and military hardware continued into East Pakistan. Special measures had taken for Dhaka and Chittagong. Protective restrictions were imposed in strategic headquarters of East Pakistan. By the end of February there were military garrisons in almost all district headquarters of East Pakistan. This was a very unusual development because normally troops in East Pakistan were stationed only in four cantonment districts.
- It looked as if steps had been taken so that East Pakistan could not complain this time that she was left undefended. The hijacking of the plane created a war-hysteria and provided an opportunity for making military preparations in East Pakistan on an unprecedented scale. The vested interest groups calculated that a war situation and strong military presence would be sufficient to bow down any movement by Bangalees.

Preparation for National Assembly Session

- Immediately after completion of the elections the AL was asking for an early session of the Assembly. They were afraid that delay might provide room for manipulations by the vested interests. Bhutto, on the other hand, urged delay: he was seeking opportunities for politics of conspiracy. He wanted behind the door negotiations with the Awami League.
- On 13 February 1971, Yahya Khan announced the summoning of the Assembly to meet at Dhaka on 3 March 1971. The Awami League Working Committee on 14 February appreciated that announcement. The next day Bhutto threatened boycott of the Assembly session. He said that his party did not support 6-point Program and he could not go to the Assembly just to endorse that. However, his consultation with leaders of West Pakistan indicated that the Program would not be accepted with suitable adjustments. He also in current tensed situation like this between India and Pakistan it was his prime responsibility to stay with his people and not to go to East Pakistan. For members of other West Pakistani parties he threw a threat that they could go but they had to come back also.
- On 17 February he said it was meaningless to go to Dhaka without being prepared to endorse the AL sponsored Constitution. He termed the Assembly a “slaughterhouse”. The next day he said that there were three power groups in the country—Awami League, Pakistan People’s Party and the Military.

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- He said that it's Awami League's choice whether they go alone or patch up with other two.
- On 28 February 1971, Bhutto put forward two alternatives: postponement of the Assembly or removal of the 120-day time limit to frame the constitution.
- Between 15 to 28 February, Bhutto's position came up for criticisms from all quarters.
- In a press conference on 24 February Mujib dwelt on all the facets of Bhutto's move and the position of the Awami League on framing of the constitution. He clearly stated that the Awami League did not want to impose a constitution of their own on all of Pakistan. In particular, he said that West Pakistan should decide its variation of autonomy for the provinces which would suit its intraregional compulsions.
- In the third week of February, the military in coalition with Bhutto decided on their next course of action. They could not allow the framing of a constitution based on the 6-point Program. Top bureaucrats joined this conspiracy as well. Yahya was confronted with two alternatives: either to carry the democratic process to its logical conclusion that is hand over power to the Awami League or to ride with the reigning mood of West Pakistani vested interests. The first step under his new strategy was to dismiss the civilian cabinet 21 February 1971. some Generals also barred some West Pakistani members to join the National Assembly in Dhaka. at the same time, deployment of troops in Dhaka was going on in full swing.
- Despite the threat, some 40 members from West Pakistan reached Dhaka. and on 1 March Yahya Khan announced postponement of Assembly sine die.