

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 07

Establishment of Pakistan Awami Muslim League



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Background

- In East Bengal, Muslim League started losing popularity within days of independence. The students withdrew support and on January 4, 1948 East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League was established by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a meeting at Fazlul Haq Hall of Dhaka University. It was considered the first opposition party of Pakistan. Although a state language movement was brewing from before, in March 1948 it was essentially an anti-Muslim League movement of students. There were other anti-establishment movements in the country and the government preferred to suppress them ruthlessly.
- In this context, the Awami League was founded in Rose Garden of KM Das Lane, Dhaka on 23 June 1949 at a convention of the leaders and workers known to be a faction of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League headed by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim. The new party was named East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. It was established with Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani as president, Ataur Rahman Khan, Sakhawat Hossain and Ali Ahmed Khan as vice-presidents, Shamsul Hoque as general secretary, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (then in jail), Khondakar Mostaq Ahmed and AK Rafiqul Hussain as joint secretaries, and Yar Mohammad Khan as treasurer.

Pakistan Awami League

- From the very inception the Awami League has been a secular and non-communal party. As a mark of its secular posture, the term 'Muslim' was deleted from the name of the party at its third council meeting held on 21-23 October 1955. The party believes in welfare economy. It has front organizations among the students, laborer, peasants, youths and women.
- The Awami League was the first opposition party in the then Pakistan. At its birth the party adopted a 42-point program with a special emphasis on the demand for provincial autonomy.
- Recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan, one man one vote, democracy, framing of a constitution, parliamentary form of government, regional autonomy and removal of disparity between the two wings had been the major demands of Awami League during the initial stage of the Pakistani rule. In the 1948-52 language movement, the Awami League and its student front, Chhatra League (est. 1948), played a vitally important role. The Awami League played a leading role in the formation of the 'All Party State Language Action Committee' in 1952 preceding the 21 February killing.

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- In the general elections of 1954 in East Bengal, it was the Awami Muslim League under the leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which was instrumental in forming the electoral united front against the government with three other opposition parties, such as *Krishak Sramik Party* led by AK Fazlul Huq, *Nejam-e-Islam* party led by Maulana Atahar Ali and *Ganatantri Dal* led by Haji Muhammad Danesh.
- During the 24 years of Pakistan, Awami League was in power in the province for only about two years (1956-1958) headed by Ataur Rahman Khan, and at the center for 13 months (12 September 1956 to 11 October 1957) as a coalition government headed by HS Suhrawardy.

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- The United Front partners formed the government headed by AK Fazlul Huq, in which the Awami League was the major partner. But he was dismissed within 56 days of his government. It was followed by a political instability marked by frequent dismissal of governments.
- But in spite of short duration, the various ministries took several important measures, which included the tackling of serious problem of food shortage, the release of the political prisoners, giving test relief to the landless peasants, the granting of financial aid to the families of language martyrs, the declaration of February 21 as a government holiday, the observance of *Pohela Baisakh* as Bangla New Year Day, the establishment of a veterinary College in Mymensingh, Fenchuganj Fertilizer Factory, Savar Dairy Farm and of Film Development Corporation (FDC) in Dhaka by the Aatur Rahman Khan government.
- As an important member of the government holding the Ministry of Industries, Commerce and Labor, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a leading role in all these.

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- In 1957, the Awami League faced a serious organizational crisis resulting in a split in the party on the issue of foreign policy. Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhasani differed fundamentally on the issue of Pakistan foreign policy. While Suhrawardy favored strong links with the West, particularly with America, Bhasani was in favor of a non-aligned foreign policy.
- The division came to surface at the Kagmari conference (Tangail) of the party (7-8 February 1957). On March 18, Maulana Bhasani resigned from the Awami League and its presidentship. In the spree of resignations, Bhasani was soon followed by 9 out of 37 members of the party's working committee. This eventually led to the formation of a new party named the National Awami Party with Maulana Bhasani as its president. This took place at a conference of his supporters held at Rupmahal Cinema Hall, Dhaka, on 25-26 July 1957.
- At this critical juncture, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took upon himself the rein of the organization. He resigned from the ministerial position (31 May 1957) after serving only nine months in order to devote full time to organization of the Awami League. Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish was made the party president.'

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- During General Ayub's autocratic regime (1958-1969), the Awami League under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the leading party in the struggle for achieving autonomy for East Bengal. Before his death in 1963, HS Suhrawardy organized an anti-Ayub united platform of major political parties named National Democratic Front (NDF) calling for the restoration of democracy and constitutional rule.
- Suhrawardy's death enabled Sheikh Mujib to become the sole leader of the Awami League. He revived the Awami League in a meeting of the central members held on 25 January 1964 at his Dhanmondi residence.
- In the event of a communal riot that broke out in 1964 in East Pakistan, the Awami League tried to establish communal harmony. Advocating communal harmony, the party circulated an official pamphlet titled *Purba Pakistan, Rukhe Darao* (East Pakistan, Stand up in Resistance).

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- In the presidential elections held on 2 January 1965 the Awami League together with some other parties organized a united front called the Combined Opposition Party (COP) to topple the autocratic Ayub regime.
- The COP fielded Miss Fatima Jinnah in support of its demand for the restoration of parliamentary democracy in place of the presidential system and for the introduction of universal suffrage as opposed to Ayub's basic democracy or the indirect system of voting by an electoral college.
- The results of the elections were decided not by popular votes but by the 80,000 electors called Basic Democrats, and expectedly the opposition lost.'