

Bangladesh Awami League

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Bangladesh Awami League one of the oldest and major political parties in Bangladesh. It is the Awami League that played the leading role in achieving the independence of Bangladesh.

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 Hussein 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, Aaur Rahman Khan, Sakhawat Hossain and Ali Ahmed Khan as vice-presidents, Shamsul Hoque as general secretary, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (then interned in jail), Khondakar Mostaq Ahmed and AK Rafiqul Hussain as joint secretaries, and Yar Mohammad Khan as treasurer. 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, laborers, peasants, youths and women. The Students League (Chatra League) was formed on 4 January, 1948 with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as its founding General Secretary.

Soon after creation of Pakistan, the Bengali Muslim leaders surprisingly found that they have no position either in the government or in the party (Muslim League). Pakistan had cheated Bengali Muslims in 1946 whenever they flatly denied that the 'Independent States' were not written in 1940 Lahore resolution. Therefore they did not agree to provide any autonomy or sovereignty to East Bengal. They also started to create conspiracy against the Bengali language. Bengal people realized that Pakistan targeted the fertile and resourceful land of Bengal, not the people. Considering this situation, Bengal people started to form their own political platform. So, the creation of Chatra League and Awami Muslim league were the ultimate results of that phenomenon.

The Awami League was the first opposition party in the then Pakistan. At its birth the party adopted a 42-point programme 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.

In the general elections of 1954 in East Bengal, it was the Awami Muslim League under the leadership of Hussein 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 Shramik Party led by AK Fazlul Huq, Nijam-e-Islam party led by Maulana Atahar Ali and Ganatantri Dal led by Haji Muhammad Danesh.

The United Front fought the elections on the basis of a 21-point comprehensive socio-political programme of which 'the state language issue' and 'the demand for autonomy of East Bengal' are the two main planks. In the elections held on 8-12 March, the United Front scored a comprehensive victory. Out of the 237 Muslim seats the Muslim League was able to secure only 9 seats as against 223 seats. Awami League alone secured 143 bagged by the Front. All the remaining 72 general seats were captured by the allies of the United Front. During the 24 years of Pakistan, Awami League was in power in the province for only about two years (1956-1958) headed by Aatur Rahman Khan, and at the centre for 13 months (12 September 1956 to 11 October 1957) as a coalition government headed by HS Suhrawardy. 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 Fertiliser 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 Labour, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a leading role in all these. At the centre, the Awami League government under Suhrawardy took a few important measures. These included the adoption of parity in all respects involving the two wings, the holding for the first time of the session of Pakistan National Assembly in Dhaka, the passing of an act in the National Assembly introducing joint electorate system (October 1956), the establishment of Jute Marketing Corporation, Inland Water Transport Authority (IWTA), and of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA).

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 favour 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.'

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 organised 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). 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 Fatema 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.'

In the aftermath of the 17-days war of 1965 between India and Pakistan that exposed the utter helplessness of the Bangalees in the absence of any noticeable military defense and security from the side of the Pakistan central government, at a conference of opposition parties in Lahore in February 1966, Sheikh Mujib presented the historic six-point programme of the Awami League. The programme included: federal parliamentary system at the centre including universal adult franchise; all power in the federating units or provinces except foreign relations and defense; separate currencies for East and West Pakistan; right of the federating units to levy taxes and duties; right to negotiate trade and commerce with foreign countries by the federating units; and finally, para-militia or para-military forces for the provinces for their own defenses.

The 6-point programme marked a shift in politics. The initial reactions at the programme were mixed and some were opposed to the idea outright. Even within the Awami League, a section was reluctant to support his six-point demand. However Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been able to get his 6-point programme ratified through the Awami League council meeting held in Eden Hotel, Dhaka on 18-19 March 1966. Sheikh Mujib was elected as president of the party, while Tajuddin Ahmed was elected as general secretary. The 6-point programme instantly stirred the younger section of the population of the country. The reaction of the Ayub government was very sharp. Terming it 'secessionist', President Ayub threatened to suppress the demand with the 'Language of weapon'. Meanwhile Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched a 3-month long mass-contact programme. He was arrested eight times during this period, finally thrown into jail on 8 May 1966. On 7 June, at the call of the Awami League a general strike was observed all over East Pakistan in support of the 6-point programme and for the release of Sheikh Mujib. The police opened fire on the crowd in Tejgoan, Tongi and Narayanganj killing 13 of them.

This was followed by large-scale arrests of the leaders and members of the Awami League throughout the country. Syed Nazrul Islam and Amena Begum took on the mantle of the party as acting president and general secretary respectively. At one stage, the Ayub government had recourse to a sort of 'final solution' in regard to the 6-point movement by instituting in 1968 a case of conspiracy against Sheikh Mujib (already in custody) and 34 other Bangalee civil-military officers, known as the Agartala conspiracy case but officially styled as 'State versus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others. The accused were charged with treason and conspiracy against the state of Pakistan. The measure, however, proved to be counter-productive. It led to the Mass upsurge of 1969 that forced Ayub Khan to step down from power.

In the backdrop of countrywide mass movement and fall of Ayub Khan, the country's first general elections were held in December 1970 under the new military regime headed by Yahya Khan. By now, Awami League turned into a nationalist platform for the Bangalees. The party went to the polls with full vigor and enthusiasm considering the election as a virtual referendum on its Six-Point Programme. Awami League won a stunning victory in the elections bagging 160 out of 162 territorial seats (72.57% votes) in East Pakistan allotted in the central legislature. Awami League had a similar landslide victory in the Provincial Assembly elections in East Pakistan winning 288 out of 300 seats (89% votes). It also won all the 7 women seats in the National Assembly and the 10 women seats in the Provincial Assembly. It meant that the people of East Pakistan and the Awami League became identical.

Thus Awami League emerged as the single majority party in the Pakistan National Assembly with 167 seats out of a total of 313. But instead of inviting Awami League to form the government, the military junta of Yahya Khan resorted to his military machine to suppress the election verdict and the aspiration of the Bangalees. The Awami League and its chief Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called a massive

Non-cooperation movement in East Pakistan from 2 March (1971) onward to which the people as a whole declared their solidarity. On March 7, Bangabandhu made his historic address in Race Course Maidan (now Suhrawardy Uddyan) giving a clarion call to the Bangalee nation for an armed resistance movement against the Pakistani ruling classes now identified as enemies. He declared: 'The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation; the struggle this time is the struggle for independence.'

The attack on the unarmed Bangalees in Dhaka and other places in East Pakistan by the Pakistani army on the dreadful night of 25 March 1971 sealed the fate of Pakistan. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and flown to West Pakistan to face a so-called trial for treason. Before courting arrest in the night of 25 March 1971, the Awami League leader Bangabandhu declared the Independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

The government-in-exile, (Mujibnagar government) formed by the elected representatives of Awami League on 10 April 1971 with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as President, Syed Nazrul Islam as Vice President (to act as president in the absence of Bangabandhu) and Tajuddin Ahmed as Prime Minister led the war of liberation.