

7th March Speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivering the historic speech on 7th March 1971 at Race Course

The *7th March Speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman* was a speech given by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a Bengali nationalist leader, on March 7, 1971 at the Ramna Race Course Maidan in Dhaka to a gathering of over two million people. He spoke at a time of increasing tensions between East Pakistan and the powerful political and military establishment of West Pakistan. The Bengali people were inspired to prepare for a potential war of independence, amid widespread reports of armed mobilization by West Pakistan. During the speech, Sheikh Mujib proclaimed, "Our struggle is for our freedom. Our struggle is for our independence" (Bengali: "আমাদের সংগ্রাম আমাদের স্বাধীনতার জন্য, আমাদের সংগ্রাম আমাদের স্বাধীনতার জন্য"). He also announced the civil disobedience movement in the province, calling for "every house to turn into a fortress". The war eventually began 18 days later, when the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight against Bengali civilians, intelligentsia, students, politicians and armed personnel.

Background

The state of Pakistan was created in 1947 during the Partition of India to be a Muslim homeland in South Asia. Its territory comprised most of the Muslim-majority provinces of British India. Pakistan included two geographically and culturally separate areas in the east and the west of India. The western zone was popularly (and for a period of time, also officially) termed West Pakistan and the eastern zone (modern-day Bangladesh) was initially termed East Bengal and later, East Pakistan. West Pakistan was seen to dominate the country politically and its leaders exploited the East economically, leading to many grievances.

East Pakistanis noticed that whenever one of them, such as Khawaja Nazimuddin, Muhammad Ali Bogra, or Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy were elected Prime Minister of Pakistan, they were

swiftly deposed by the largely West Pakistani establishment. The military dictatorships of Ayub Khan (27 October 1958 – 25 March 1969) and Yahya Khan (25 March 1969 – 20 December 1971), both West Pakistanis, only heightened such feelings.

In 1966 the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched the Six Point Movement, directed toward provincial autonomy of East Pakistan. The Pakistani establishment rejected the proposals. The military government arrested Sheikh Mujib and charged him with treason in the well-known Agartala Conspiracy Case. After three years in jail, Mujib was released in 1969; the case was dropped in the face of mass protests and widespread violence in East Pakistan, with people demanding his release.

In 1970 the Awami League, the largest East Pakistani political party and led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a landslide victory in the national elections. The party won 167 of the 169 seats allotted to East Pakistan, and a majority of the 313 seats in the National Assembly. This gave the Awami League the constitutional right to form a government. However, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (a Sindhi ethnic and professor by profession), the leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party, refused to allow Rahman to become the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Instead, he proposed the idea of having two Prime Ministers, one for each wing. Negotiations began in Dhaka between the two sides. In January 1971, President Yahya Khan left Dhaka after the first round of negotiations and in the airport promised that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be the next Prime Minister of Pakistan and that the newly elected National Assembly would convene in Dhaka on March 3, 1971. However Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was vehemently opposed to a Bengali becoming Prime Minister of Pakistan. He had also opposed the Six Points proposal of the Awami League. Bhutto began a campaign of racially charged speeches across west Pakistan to invoke the fear of possible Bengali domination. He warned West Pakistani MPs-elect not to travel to the East. Capitalization on West-Pakistan and East-Pakistani separatism, Bhutto feared a civil war, therefore, he secretly send his most trusted companion dr. Mubashir Hassan to meet with Mujib and his inner circle. Talks were succeeded and it was decided that Mujib would served as Prime minister with Bhutto as Mujib's President. These developments were kept hidden from public and from Pakistan Armed Forces. Meanwhile, Bhutto increased the pressure on General Yahya Khan to take a stance.

The national assembly was thus "postponed" on March 3. This led to a massive outcry across East Pakistan as thousands protested the postponement which they felt was the last nail in the coffin for a united Pakistan. The cities of Dhaka, Chittagong, Rangpur, Comilla, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Khulna were engulfed in violence which saw the security forces killing dozens of unarmed protesters. The atmosphere became tense as across the province, Bengalis began hoisting the flag of a future independent Bangladesh. There were open calls from the masses for their leader Sheikh Mujib to declare independence from Pakistan.

The Awami League then called a mammoth public gathering at Dhaka's historic Race Course Maidan on March 7 to respond to the boiling tension across the province.

Summary of the speech

The speech started with this: "Today, I come to you with a heavy heart. You know everything and understand as well. We tried our best. But the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur have been dyed red with the blood of our brethren. People of Bangladesh today want freedom. They want to survive. They want to have their rights. What wrong did we do?". The extempore speech lasted about 19 minutes, with more than 1100 words. In this speech, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib mentioned a 4-point condition before joining the National Assembly meeting on 25th March; these were:

1. The immediate lifting of martial law, 2. Immediate withdrawal of all military personnel to their barracks, 3. Immediate transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people, 4. Proper inquiry into the loss of life.

Sheikh Mujib also articulated several directives to the nation as part of civil disobedience movement, such as:

- people would not pay taxes and the Government servants would take orders only from him
- The secretariat, government and semi-government offices, High court and other courts throughout East Bangla would observe Strikes. Necessary exemptions would be announced from time to time
- Only local and inter-district telephone communication would function
- Railway and ports might function, but railway and port workers would not cooperate if railway or ports were used for mobilizing of forces for the purpose of repression against the people of East Bangla

At the end, raising his fist, Sheikh Mujib cried out at the top of his voice: "OUR STRUGGLE THIS TIME IS A STRUGGLE FOR OUR FREEDOM, OUR STRUGGLE THIS TIME IS A STRUGGLE FOR OUR INDEPENDENCE. JOY BANGLA."

This historic address was a de facto declaration of Bangladesh's independence.

Speculation of unilateral declaration of independence

The eyes of the world focused on Dhaka's Race Course Maidan that day as international media descended upon East Pakistan amidst speculation that Sheikh Mujib would declare a unilateral declaration of independence from Pakistan. The speculation gained credibility as there were open

calls by people in East Pakistan to make the unilateral declaration. However, keeping in mind the failure of the Ian Smith declaration in Rhodesia and the failure of the Biafra struggle in Nigeria, Sheikh Mujib tacitly left out a direct declaration of independence from his speech. Nevertheless, the speech was immensely successful in giving Bengalis a clear goal of their struggle, the goal of independence. It inspired millions across East Pakistan to get engaged in the freedom struggle.

Acknowledgment of merit for the speech

- In a writing published in the weekly magazine 'Bichitra' in March 26, 1974, Ziaur Rahman (later President of Bangladesh) wrote that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7 address was the inspiration behind his taking part in the 1971 liberation war.
- The speech has been recognized as one of the world famous speeches in the book "We Shall Fight on the Beaches: The Speeches That Inspired History", by Jacob F. Field ^[3]

7th March Speech in Popular Culture

- The highly applauded documentary film Muktir Gaan by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud begins with the video of Sheikh Mujib's 7th March speech.
- Prominent novelist and columnist Anisul Hoque splendidly blended 7th March speech in his much-acclaimed fact-based novel Maa (novel), published in 2004.
- In his first English novel, *The Black Coat*, Bangladeshi-Canadian author Neamat Imam creates a character called Nur Hussain who memorizes Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7th March speech during the Bangladesh famine of 1974. Nur Hussain and his trainer Khaleque Biswas begin to earn money utilizing the nationalistic fervor of Bengali people, but as the famine deepens, Nur utilizes the tone of the speech to speak out his own mind against Sheikh Mujib's rule.