The Elections 1970: From Ballot to Nowhere

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ABSTRACT

Although Pakistan achieved independence through a constitutional means on the basis of 1945-46 elations, however, after getting independence it hardly followed a constitutional way leading to the electoral politics. No general elections on the basis of adult franchise could be held till 1970 due to one or the other reason. The authoritarian rule of the ruling party Pakistan Muslim League (PML) avoided going for elections due to their declining popularity against other regional and linguistic political forces of the country. Although, President General Ayub Khan, in order to re-elect himself, hold indirect elections on the basis of Basic Democracy, however, the first ever general elections on the basis of adult franchise was held by General Yahya Khan. By avoiding his personal intentions to get himself re-elected as the head of state in case if no one could get clear cut majority, he got the credit to held the first ever general elections in the constitutional history of Pakistan. Present study will strive to analyse that how these elections exposed the bitter realities that ultimately ended at the disintegration of Pakistan and the separation of eastern wing from rest of the country.

Keywords: Basic Democracy, Adult franchise, Martial Law, Legal Framework Order, Free and fair, Ethnic cleavage

INTRODUCTION

The constitutional history of Pakistan from its independence in 1947 to 1970 observed no general elections, on the basis of adult franchise at national level, until the second Martial Law regime, under General Yahya Khan, determined to hold the first general elections. The only earlier national elections, held by President Ayub Khan in 1964, were indirect through an electoral college of 80,000 Basic Democrats (B.D.).[1] Even at the provincial level, no election had been held since 1954 in East Pakistan, 1953 in Sindh and 1951 in the Punjab and the NWFP, however, in Balochistan, which had only been given the full status of a province in 1970, these were the first ever elections. Yet, efforts for the formation of government led to deteriorating political conditions which resulted in Army action in East Pakistan, India’s military intervention, separation of the Eastern Wing, formation of Bangladesh and surfacing of regionalism in rest of the country.

ELECTIONS ON THE MOVE

The elections were originally scheduled for October 1970, but the devastating cyclone in East Pakistan upset the plans. This worst natural calamity killed, according to the official estimate, over 200,000 persons (and unofficially about five times that figure), affected over three million people and destroyed 90 per cent of the crops and houses in 3,000 square miles.[2] The Awami League fully exploited this calamity to prove that East Pakistan had been treated unjustly. One argument put forward was that no warning had been issued in these areas although there was a storm warning system in East Pakistan. Similarly, the relief operation was slow and inadequate only intensified the deep anger of the Bengali people. Majority of the politicians from East Pakistan openly accused West Pakistanis of undisguised hostility. According to Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman, "A million people had died in the cyclone, and another million would lay down their lives willingly to thwart a conspiracy against Bengalis by bureaucrats, vested interests, the ruling clique and a coterie of old politicians."[3]

The deteriorating political situation forced the Government of Pakistan to announce new date for the elections. According to the new schedule, the elections to the National and Provincial Assemblies were to be held on 7th and 17th December, 1970, respectively.[4] It was the main demand of most of the political parties, all of them decided to participate in the Elections. However, when nominations for elections to the National Assembly were received, it became obvious that there was no possibility of any party securing an overall majority in the House based on national territorial status.

For the 300 National Assembly seats, there were almost 1957 candidates. However, after rejection and withdrawal of nomination papers, 1579 candidates (these included 319 independent candidates) were left in the field. Similarly, for East Pakistan's Provincial Assembly 1850 candidates and for West Pakistan 1385 candidates from different political parties and groups with conflicting ideologies were to take part in the elections. (See, Party-wise Candidates on Territorial Basis, Table 1).

Table 1. Party-wise Candidates on Territorial Basis

Party	*Candidates in East Pakistan*	*Candidates in West Pakistan*
Awami League	162	4
Jamaat-i-Islami	69	79
Muslim League (Convention)	93	31
Muslim League (Qaiyum)	65	67
Pakistan People's Party	---	119
Muslim League (Council)	50	69
Pakistan Democratic Party	81	27
Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (Wali Khan Group)	13	90
National Awami Paty (Bhashani Group)	36	25
National Awami Paty (Bhashani Group)	15	5

Source: Herbert Feldman, The End and the Beginning: Pakistan, 1969-1972 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 72-73

During the election campaign, it became obvious that "national" parties had little grass-root support, while parties with mass support tended to be regional. On one hand, there were "Rightists" like Pakistan Muslim League and it's all three factions, Pakistan Democratic Party (PDP), Jamiat Ulema-i Islam (JUI), Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP) and Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan (JIP) who were gradually losing popular support and on the other, there were "Leftists" including National Awami Party (NAP) of Abdul Wali Khan and Sindh United Front (SUF) under G. M. Syed.[5]

In order to prevent violence in the election campaign, Yahya Khan issued MLR No. 60; which prohibited anti-Pakistan dialogical propaganda, violence attempts to mould public opinion, excursions of undue pressure on newspapers, interference with the activities of other parties, exhibition of weapons at public meetings.[6] The election campaign which started in January 1970, and went on for almost a full year turned out to be the longest election campaign ever in the parliamentary history of Pakistan. The issues which got prominence during the campaign were not identical in all over the country.

The main issue in the election campaign in East Pakistan was the question of provincial autonomy and the political scene from the beginning was dominated by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman of the Awami League. The League had organizations of student, labourers and peasants to uphold its objectives. However, Mujib's leadership contributed to its emergence as the dominant party in East Pakistan. Upon H. S. Suhrawardy's death in 1963, he left the National Democratic Front and revived the Awami League in January 1964.[7] Although Mujib was a wonderful speaker with the ability to mesmerize the crowed, however, negative role of the West Pakistani establishment also contributed in his success. The people of East Pakistan were unhappy, when three Prime Ministers hailing from Easter wing—Khawaja Nazimuddin, Muhammad Ali Bogra and H.S. Suhrawardy—were unceremoniously dismissed because of intrigues hatched by West Pakistani coterie wielding power at the Centre.[8] Moreover, failure of the central government to introduce Bangla language, the unjust allocation of national resources to East Pakistan and low representation of Bengalis in the central services, particularly in higher positions, were matters which were deeply resented in East Pakistan.[9]

When President Ayub Khan began to make preparations for the coming Presidential election in 1969-70, the majority of opposition parties, including the Awami League, decided to boycott it and the climate for anti-Ayub turned into mass movement. When the movement continued vigorously for over four months, it took a violent turn in East Pakistan.[10] Government machinery miserably failed to suppress the uprising in the province and Ayub finally realized the separatist dimensions of the movement. Consequently, on February 21, 1969, he announced his intention not contesting the next Presidential election.[11] The political climate made Mujib's continued detention impractical. His release and dropping of charges against all those held was one of the demands accepted by Ayub prior to the Round Table Conference (RTC).[12] Consequently, when the Conference was called, he was released to enable him to take part.

Actually, in a last bid, Ayub convened a RTC in which all major political parties except the PPP and the NAP (Bhashani Group) were represented under the forum of a grand alliance of Democratic Action Committee against Ayub regime. Bhutto did not participate in the Conference as he did not see any benefit of compromising with Ayub while Bhashani preferred going to the masses.[13] Mujib-ur-Rehman, however, proposed a formula for the resolution of crisis which included proportional representation for East Pakistan, shifting the capital to Dacca, the abolition of One Unit, direct elections on the basis of universal suffrage and a parliamentary form of government.[14] Ayub Khan showed his willingness to accept other demands of DAC, except the alteration of the federal structure of the country. However, as Mohammad Waseem observes, "The DAC lost its 'legitimacy' in the eyes of the masses in favour of the two non-participants, Bhutto and Bhashani, as well as Mujib who soon pulled out of the DAC, and was thus saved from the charge of a sell-out."[15]Consequently, political situation of the country took a more violent turn.

However, the final phase of the movement reached its climax with the arrest of many political leaders including Z.A. Bhutto and Abdul Wali Khan. Ayub Khan had no alternative but turn to the army to restore law and order but the chiefs were unwilling to support an "unpopular" president. Ultimately, on March 25, 1969, he resigned as a President but instead of transferring power under the Constitution, Ayub Khan handed over power to General Yahya Khan by appointing him as the CMLA, who after getting some power, promised to hold elections, offered the opportunity that Mujib and his Awami League had long sought.

The Awami League had a fairly sound base in East Pakistan at the advent of elections. However, the boycott of elections by Maulana Bhashani and by the National Progressive League and Krishak Saramik Party in East Pakistan left the League virtually alone in the field.[16] Moreover, the traditional parties, like the Muslim League and the Jamaat-i-Islami or the Nizam-i-Islam Party, which set up candidates in both wings, mustered no support in East Pakistan.[17] The Awami League's campaign soon turned itself into a movement of Bengali resurgence and without doubt the most controversial issue in the campaign was the use of Six Point Programme.

Consequently, the Government did not prohibit his use of the Six Point Programme from his party platform. Awami League's leaders though visited West Pakistan but these visits were aimed at formulating a front against the Punjab. Mujib's collaborators in the West Wing were G. M. Syed, Hyder Bakhsh Jatoi and Abdus Samad Achakzai.[18] In spite of these interactions, he claimed that West Pakistan had been developed by East Pakistan's resources and the Six Point Formula, portrayed as "Magna Carta" for the Bengalis, would turn East Pakistan into '*Sonar Bangla*' (golden Bengal).[19]

Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party was the second 'winning' party. His personality, his socialistic ideas and his slogan of *Roti, Kapra aur Makan*, meaning food, clothing and shelter, were the factors that contributed to the popularity of Pakistan Peoples Party.[20] During the election campaign, the PPP reiterated its principles: 'Islam is our faith; Democracy is our polity; Socialism is our economy; all Powers to the people'. Similarly, the party introduced a new language of politics focusing on the local issues related to the industrial relations, landlord-tenant conflicts and demands from the government that shelter be provided to the working class etc. Moreover, the PPP developed new means to reach its voters who were looking for a major social and economic change, even though in a regional context. In the Punjab, to the delight of the locals, Bhutto vented his venomous rage against India but in the province of Sindh he relied on the local power of influential personalities as Mir Rasool Baksh Talpur of Hyderabad, Makhdoom Talib-ul-Maula from Hala, Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi from Nawabshah, Pir of Ranipur and other *pirs* and *waderos* of the Sindh.[21]

However, his advocacy of socialism brought in the leftists. During the campaign, Bhutto was criticized by some religious parties of preaching "socialism" which they named *Kufr* (anti-Islamic). Consequently, he tried to allay the apprehensions of many a rightist by his flexible stand on socialism; Islamic socialism.[22] Undoubtedly, Bhutto's own popularity as a native Sindhi also greatly enhanced his resulting success at the polls in this southern province. Yet, Bhutto's type of populism was not a new phenomenon in the world. For the West Pakistan, however, this approach was a new development. Until that time, West Pakistani politicians had followed a very low key approach towards politics, preferring to negotiate among themselves rather than to use popular support to further their aims and ambitions.[23] PPP wanted a republican form of government based on adult franchise, ensuring civil liberties, fixed minimum wages and health facilities for the workers, elimination of illiteracy, equal rights for women, independence of judiciary and its separation from the executive, academic freedom etc. Bhutto, who showed no interest in East Pakistan, concentrated on the economic exploitation of the capitalists in West Pakistan.[24] Hence, he won support of western wing on the basis of individual economic and social equality.

The rightist parties, at this occasion, propagated their views and denounced their opponents' programmes especially in regard to socialism and regional autonomy. The Pakistan Muslim League, and it's all factions, stood for common ideals: a strong Centre with provincial autonomy consistent with national integrity, promotion of Muslim nationalism and economic justice in line with Islamic teachings.[25] However, it had lost its appeal in East Pakistan after it was totally defeated in 1954, when Bengali nationalism had pushed it in the background.

Similarly, religious parties including Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan and Jamaat-i-Islami denounced socialism and advocated Islamic system for Pakistan. According to them, "Socialism was un-Islamic ideology and regional autonomy a threat to the basis of Pakistan".[26] Even 113 prominent Ulema in their ranks issued *fatwas*, declaring socialism as anti-Islamic. Yet, the rightists as a whole failed to unite on one platform.

The leftists, on the other hand, believed that the socialism is the only panacea for all ills and Pakistan is on the threshold of a socialist revolution. The National Awami Party was the major abode of the leftists rested on secular ideas, provincial autonomy and dissolution of One Unit. In addition, the party wanted to bring about a socialist system in the country.[27] Similarly, the Sindh United Front led by G. M. Syed served as the socializing agency for the younger generation and played the most important role in creating consciousness of Sindhi ethno-nationalism among the educated middle class.[28] However, like rightists, the leftists could not form a united platform during the elections.

ELECTION RESULTS

The elections of 1970 resulted in an overwhelming victory for Sheikh Mujib's Awami League in East Pakistan. The Awami League won an absolute majority in the National Assembly by securing 160 out of 300 seats.

Table 2. Pakistan National Assembly Elections, 1970-71

Party	*Punjab*	*Sindh*	*NWFP*	*Baluchistan*	*East Pakistan*	*Total*
Al	---	---	---	---	160	160
PPP	62	18	1	---	---	81
PML(Q)	1	1	7	---	---	9
CML	7	---	---	---	---	7
JUI (H)	---	---	6	1	---	7
MJU	4	3	---	---	---	7
NAP (W)	---	---	3	3	---	6
JIP	1	2	1	---	---	4
PML (C)	2	---	---	---	---	2
PDP	---	---	---	---	1	1
Independence	5	3	7	---	1	16
Total	82	27	25	4	162	300

Sources: Pakistan Observer, January 20, 1971

It also won all seven seats reserved for women from East Pakistan. Yet, the elections set the Bengalis on the route that was to take them toward complete independence a year later.[29] The People's party, on the other hand, emerged as the second largest party in the National Assembly of Pakistan. It secured 81 out of 138 seats allocated for West Pakistan, though Bhutto never really expected the electoral landslide he eventually received in the western wing. The rightist parties were badly uprooted as they could secure only 37 out of 300 seats of the National Assembly: the QML won 9 seats, CML 2, Con ML 7, JUI 7, MJUI 7, JIP 4 and PDP 1 seat.[30] The performance of the leftists was even worse, the NAP (Wali Group), a pro-Russian party which like the Awami League stood for secularism, socialism, full autonomy for East Bengal and friendly relations with India, won 7 seats—3 in the NWFP, 3 in Balochistan and 1 indirectly elected women's seat.

In the provincial assembly elections the prototype of the National Assembly was almost repeated. Awami League's strength in the East Pakistan Assembly was 288 out of 300 seats but it had no representation in the provincial Assemblies in West Pakistan.[31] In West Pakistan, the Peoples Party won a majority in the Punjab (113 out of 180 seats) and Sindh (28 out of 60 seats) assemblies, however, in the NWFP and Balochistan assemblies there was a plurality of parties; with the NAP as dominant one.[32] The election results showed that no East Pakistan based party won a single seat in West Pakistan and similarly no West Pakistan party in East Pakistan, the situation crystallized the polarization between East and West Pakistan. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Pakistan Provincial Assembly Elections, 1970-71

Party	*Punjab*	*Sindh*	*NWFP*	*Baluchistan*	*E.Pakisstan*	*Total*
AL	---	---	---	---	288	288
PPP	113	28	3	---	---	144
PML(Q)	6	5	10	3	---	24
NAP (W)	---	---	13	8	1	22
CML	15	4	1	---	---	20
MJU	4	7	---	---	---	11
JUI (H)	2	---	4	2	---	8
PML (C)	6	---	2	---	---	8
PDP	4	---	---	---	2	6
JIP	1	1	1	---	1	4
Others	1	1	---	2	1	5
Independence	28	14	6	5	7	60
Total	82	27	25	4	162	300

By any criteria, as majority believes, elections of 1970 were free and fair. The sweep of Awami League in East Pakistan was about as complete as it could have been, whereas, the Peoples Party acquired a clear majority of seats of West Pakistani provinces in the National

Assembly. However, what is often overlooked about the PPP's performance in the elections was that its victory in the West Pakistan was disproportionately large in comparison to the actual percentage of votes it received. This is clearly revealed in the table 4.

Table 4. Percentage of valid votes polled by the PPP in the 1970 National Elections

East Pakistan	*Punjab*	*Sindh*	*NWFP*	*Balochistan*	*Total West Pakistan*	*Total Pakistan*
----	41.66%	44.95%	14.28%	2.38%	38.89%	18.63%

Source: Sherbaz Khan Mazari, A Journey to Disillusionment (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 173

Two factors helped the PPP in receiving an unduly large share of seats in proportion to the votes cast for it. One factor was the system of plurality-based election in single-member constituencies, more commonly known as the 'first past the post' system in which the candidate with the most votes wins. The second factor which assisted the PPP was that a total of 798 candidates, it contested the 138 National Assembly seats in West Pakistan. The rival candidates divided the vote among themselves to PPP's great advantage.

CONCLUSION

Yahya Khan's decision to hold the first general elections in the political history of Pakistan is generally taken as the first step towards democratically elected civilian government. However, some explanations have also been offered for this decision. It has been often suggested that the army believed that the elections would see the emergence of a large number of political parties in the Assembly. Thus, no party would have a commanding majority; thereby leaving the initiative in the hands of the President and the emergence of coalition government.[20] The results of the elections clearly indicated some political change in Pakistan. The 'old guard' politics were badly routed. The founder party of Pakistan, Muslim League, including its two breaking factions, had lost completely. The Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman emerged as the sole representative of East Pakistan, eliminating all religious and leftist organizations from the constitutional struggle. Similarly, the PPP led by Z.A. Bhutto won nearly by a two-third majority, establishing its claim to be the most important political factor in West Pakistan.

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