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The Role of Awami League During The Ayub Khan Era (1958-1969): An Historical Analysis

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Abstract

During the Ayub Khan period in Pakistan, from 1958 to 1969, Awami League (AL) played an important and multifaceted role in the country's political scenery. The Bengali Nationalist broke away from the dominant Muslim League and formed a new party. Founded on 1949 by Bengali Nationalists Abdul Hamid Khan Bashani, Yar Mohammad Khan, Shamsul Haq and Shawkat Ali, later joined by Hussain Shaheed Surwardi who went on to become a prime minister of Pakistan, initially a secular and leftist party, it focused on the rights of the Bengali-speaking population in East Pakistan. After October 7, 1958 political parties had no or very little role to play till 1962, because political parties were ban. After that when the ban was lifted, they had to serve under severe restrictions. Ayub Khan blamed that political parties and their leadership were responsible for the political instability in the country. The Awami League's ideology was rooted in Bengali nationalism, democracy, and socialism, whereas Ayub Khan's regime was characterized by authoritarianism, centralization, and a pro-Western foreign policy. The Awami League's emphasis on regional autonomy and democratic rights clashed with Ayub's vision of a centralized, unitary state. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership played a crucial role in shaping the Awami League's opposition to Ayub Khan. Rahman's charismatic leadership, strategic thinking, and ability to mobilize mass support enabled the Awami League to maintain its relevance and influence despite Ayub's repression. The Awami League opposed Ayub Khan's economic policies, which they saw as favoring the wealthy elite and neglecting the needs of the common people. The Awami League also opposed

Ayub Khan's foreign policy, particularly his alignment with the United States and his handling of relations with India.

Keywords: Awami League, Ayub Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Six Points Movement.

Introduction

The Awami Muslim League was founded on June 23, 1949, in Dhaka at a meeting chaired by Aatur Rahman Khan and Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Shamsul Haque was appointed as general secretary and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bashani as president during the conference. A language dispute arose between East and West Pakistan, culminating on January 26, 1952, when Governor General Khwaja Nazimuddin declared Urdu as the national language. This decision was met with resistance from the Bengali population, who sought Bengali to be recognized as the national language. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the suppression of Bengali culture negatively impacted Pakistan's development. The first protest in the East was centered on defending the Bengali language against the imposition of Urdu as the state language. This opposition evolved into a demand for greater autonomy, leading to the election of Bashani as president and Mujibur Rahman as general secretary. Ultimately, this movement progressed towards a program for de facto separation. On November 14, the United Front (Jugto front) was formed, and the historic 21 points were adopted. In 1955, the term "Muslim" was removed from the East Pakistan Awami League's name to promote inclusivity and secularism. On March 18, 1957, Maulana Bashani resigned, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took over leadership. In 1958, Martial Law was enforced, with General Ayub Khan becoming the Chief Martial Law Administrator. Ayub Khan aimed to curb Bengali influence by merging the provinces of West Pakistan into a single unit alongside East Pakistan. Local discontent in West Pakistan rose significantly under Ayub Khan,

who detained political figures, including Mujibur Rahman, and banned all political parties. After Rahman's release in December 1959, he and his supporters aimed to establish an independent nation. Ayub Khan's "Basic Democracy" proposal was rejected by politicians, leading the Awami League and other parties to form the National Democratic Front (NDF) during a year of protests against his regime. On 5 February 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman introduced the Historic 6-Points agenda, which aimed for maximum autonomy for East Pakistan and advocated for a loose confederation with West Pakistan. The key components included: a federal government with a parliamentary system elected by one-person-one-vote; separate reserve banks and currencies for East and West Pakistan; provincial control over all issues except defense and foreign policy; the establishment of a paramilitary force for East Pakistan; state responsibility for fiscal matters; and separate management of monetary and trade policies by each wing. On January 18, 1968, Mujibur Rahman was arrested in the Agartala Conspiracy case. In response, the Awami League and other parties formed the Democratic Action Committee on January 8, 1969, to restore democracy, leading to protests by the Student Movement Council and Mujib's release. He was later honored with the title "Bangabandhu" on February 23 in Dhaka. The fall of Ayub Khan's regime on March 25, General Yahya Khan imposed martial law and announced Pakistan's first general elections.

Opposition to Ayub Khan

The Awami League (AL) was not reinstated with the Political Parties Act due to its leader Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy's belief in delaying the revival of political parties until the 1962 Constitution's democratization was complete. Although pressure mounted for the AL's revival as political parties began to reemerge,

Suhrawardy remained opposed to the idea. Even during his medical absence from March to December 1963, his associates adhered to his wishes, rejecting a proposal for an AL-NAP merger. Suhrawardy's death on December 5, 1963, led to a significant shift in Awami League (AL) thinking, with a revivalist view gaining dominance. On January 11, 1964, the West Pakistan AL's working committee decided to revive the party, which created divisions in East Pakistan. One faction, led by Ata al-Rahman, maintained Suhrawardy's stance, while the other, headed by Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, pushed for an immediate revival. Ultimately, Mujib's faction won, resulting in the party's revival at the end of January, with Maulana Abd al-Rashid Tarkabagish as president and Mujib as general secretary. In March, this revival was ratified by the AL's central working committee.¹

The Awami League faced government backlash due to their activities, resulting in several short detentions and legal cases against key leaders, notably Mujibur Rahman. One significant case in January 1961, under the Press and Publications Ordinance, involved allegations that Rahman and colleagues had thrown pamphlets titled "Purba Pakistan Rakhia Dared" onto the governor's car.² Mujibur Rahman faced multiple legal cases, including one under the East Pakistan Safety Ordinance and another for making seditious speeches, utilized by the government to limit his political activities. Notably, after delivering a critical speech to party workers in

¹ Muhammad Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1958-1969*, Volume II, 10th Edition National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Centre of Excellence, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, 2018, p, 163

² Pakistan Times, June 1, 1964

Karachi in August 1964, his bail was revoked by a magistrate in Dhaka, prompting him to end his West Pakistan tour prematurely.³

The reorganization of the AL was halted due to its participation in the 1964-65 elections. The party joined the COP, endorsed its nine-point program, and actively campaigned for the presidential election. Notable leaders like, Nasr Allah Khan and Mujibur Rahman were involved with the COP high command during this campaign. The Awami League showed great respect for Miss Fatima Jinnah, organizing her campaign tour in East Pakistan. Her popularity and warm reception raised hopes for political change amongst the AL. However, her election defeat led to deep frustration within the AL leadership, reinforcing the belief that changing the government was nearly impossible under the existing political system.⁴ The September War significantly impacted the Awami League (AL) and heightened its internal divisions along regional lines. While party leaders uniformly condemned Indian aggression and supported Pakistan's war efforts, their post-war positions diverged. West Pakistan AL expressed disappointment with the Tashkent Declaration and initiated a civil disobedience movement, whereas East Pakistan AL leaders welcomed the Declaration. The war highlighted East Pakistan's defenselessness, reinforcing their demands for regional autonomy and self-sufficiency in defense.⁵ In February 1966, a national conference in Lahore aimed to unify opposition parties' response to the Tashkent declaration. Mujibur Rahman and his colleagues boycotted the event due to the refusal to discuss his Six-Point programme. However, the West Pakistan Awami League, led by Nawabzada Nasr

³ Nawa-i-Waqt, August 8, 1964

⁴ Sheikh Mujib Al Rehman, Six Point Formula; Our Right to Live, Dacca, 1966

⁵ Pakistan Observer, October 29, 1967, Statement by Sheikh Mujib al- Rehman

Allah Khan, participated and was part of a five-member committee formed to visit East Pakistan.

The Agartala Conspiracy Case posed a significant threat to EPAL, but the party successfully navigated the situation through its strategy and the government's poor handling of the case. The conspiracy significantly influenced East Pakistan's political landscape, with few believing Mujibur Rahman's involvement. His detention further fueled public skepticism. The government's effort to discredit him backfired, enhancing his reputation as a national hero amongst the Bengalis. Thereafter, his release in February 1969 amid public pressure, Mujibur Rahman gained prominence, eclipsing other politicians and establishing EPAL as the leading political party in East Pakistan.

Sh. Mujib Six Point Formula

The authorship of the Six-Point programme is contested, with some suggesting that it was drafted by Ayub Khan's bureaucrats to stir opposition, while others believe it involved the U.S. consul in Karachi or Bengali intellectuals who presented it to Nur al-Amin before passing it to Mujibur Rahman. Regardless of its origins, the Six Points aligned with EPAL's earlier resolutions, which advocated for two sovereign regional units, allowing only defense and foreign affairs to remain under central government control, with regional autonomy in those areas as well.⁶ The Six Point program demanded: (i) a federal parliamentary government with

⁶ Rounaq Jahan, Pakistan: Failure in National Integration, pp, 42-43

universal adult franchise, (ii) limited federal government responsibilities to defense and foreign affairs, (iii) separate currencies for the provinces or restrictions on capital movement, (iv) local tax authority in the province of collection, (v) exclusive control over foreign exchange earned by East Pakistan, and (vi) the establishment of an independent militia for East Pakistan.⁷

Mujibur Rahman introduced his Six Point programme at a national conference without prior authorization, later publicly presenting it in Karachi. The EPAL's working committee unanimously adopted it as their party creed, with Rahman elected president and Taj al-Din Ahmad as general secretary. EPAL initiated a two-phased mass movement, starting with the distribution of explanatory leaflets. The Youth League and students campaigned successfully for Bengali letters on number plates and shop signboards, while EPAL's outreach emphasized disparities between East and West Pakistan, resonating with the Bengali population.

The speeches of Mujibur Rahman, aligned with the Six Points movement, gained traction due to ineffective government policies under Ayub Khan, especially during the March to May 1966 period. The government's focus on the Six Points and Bhutto's challenge for a public debate diverted attention from the Tashkent Declaration. Mujib's repeated arrests for his speeches further highlighted governmental repression, and by May 9, 1966, when he was arrested alongside Taj al-Din Ahmad and Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmad, the movement had gained significant momentum.⁸ The Six Points movement was primarily limited to the EPAL, which recognized the mixed sentiments about the initiative in West

⁷ Six Points of the Awami League

⁸ Muhammad Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1958-1969*, Volume II, p, 171

Pakistan. The Awami League (AL) in West Pakistan refrained from commenting on the Six Points, as there was a lack of consensus within the party. Despite internal differences, the AL expressed interest in forming an alliance with opposition parties, but the EPAL mandated that negotiations must be based on its Six Points.⁹ The central AL working committee established a twelve-member negotiating team that joined the PDM and signed an eight-point program. In response, EPAL leadership, including acting president Sayyad Nazr al-Islam and Taj al Din Ahmad, asserted that the negotiating team lacked the mandate to sign any document, emphasizing that only the working committee or EPAL could provide a final verdict on the issue.¹⁰

The Awami League (AL) experienced a regional split, with pro-Six Point members, mainly from EPAL, breaking away from the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) to pursue an independent path. Conversely, the Nasr Allah Khan and Zahir al-Din-led faction remained with the PDM and integrated into the alliance, losing their independent identity. The pro-Six Point faction focused on expanding its base in East Pakistan, gaining support among peasants, laborers, and students, despite limited influence in West Pakistan. During scheduled party elections, Mujibur Rahman was elected president, and Taj al-Din Ahmad became general secretary.¹¹

During the Ayub Khan era he initially underestimated the Awami League and the influence of the Six Point Formula, viewing it as a minor threat. His failure to recognize the seriousness of Sheikh Mujib's policies led to the arrest of the leader

⁹ Dawn, March 8, 1967

¹⁰ Ibid, May 2, 1967

¹¹ Pakistan Times, October 21, 1968

instead of engaging with the demands. This approach, characterized by repression and violence, fostered a perception of the Central Government as an oppressive force, treating East Pakistan like a colony of West Pakistan. The growing discontent among Bengalis culminated in a movement against Ayub Khan's authoritarian regime, driven largely by students, ultimately leading towards the desire for East Pakistan's independence.

Student Movements Against Ayub Khan and Politics of AL

The students in East Pakistan actively protested against the Ayub regime after the introduction of the University Ordinances, which imposed various punishments and energized the student movement. Political leaders, unable to effectively mobilize the populace, began to seek support from student organizations, which, in turn, aligned with political parties to achieve their goals. The student movement in East Pakistan was more organized and politically driven compared to West Pakistan, where students lacked cohesive organization and connections to political objectives in East Pakistan, political unrest led to students gaining a significant role as key political leaders were frequently imprisoned. During the anti-Ayub movement, three major student organizations, East Pakistan Students League, East Pakistan Students Union (Matia Group), and East Pakistan Students Union (Menon Group) united to form the All-Pakistan Students Action Committee (SAC), driven by a shared agenda and leadership. This coalition received support from the NAP (pro-Beijing Bhashani Group) and the AL (Six Points), but it remained limited to East Pakistan with no connections to West Pakistan student groups.

The Eleven-Point programme adopted by the SAC combined the demands of students, NAP, and AL, which included: restoration of provincialized colleges,

increasing the number of educational institutions, implementing night shifts in colleges, reducing tuition fees and hostel charges by 50%, adopting Bengali as the medium of instruction, increasing teacher salaries, ensuring free schooling up to class VII, establishing a medical university, introducing a condensed course for polytechnic students, providing fare concessions for transport, ensuring job opportunities, and calling for the repeal of certain ordinances and reports regarding university autonomy and education policy. The key points from the text include the repeal of the National Education Commission and the Hamood al-Rahman Report, the establishment of parliamentary democracy based on universal adult franchise, and a federal government with limited powers focused on defense, foreign policy, and currency. It also proposes creating a sub-federation for Baluchistan, NWFP, (KP) and Sindh with regional autonomy. Other main ideas include the nationalization of banks and major industries, tax reductions for peasants, fair wages for workers, flood control for East Pakistan, and the withdrawal of emergency laws and military pacts, alongside the release of all political prisoners.¹²

The PDM leadership was unprepared for the anti-Ayub movement, which had drawn in its workers before the alliance established its policy. Their national executive convened in Dhaka in early January 1969, with Asghar Khan attending. On January 6, they opted not to participate in upcoming elections under the current constitution and proposed five demands: direct elections based on adult franchise, full powers for elected bodies, repeal of emergency laws, restoration of civil rights, and release of political prisoners. They committed to collaborating with other

¹² Dawn, February 19, 1967

democratic forces to pursue a disciplined, peaceful movement.¹³ The PDM sought to expand its alliance by negotiating with external parties, while the PPP opted not to join these discussions to strengthen its independent position. The PPP's general secretary announced that Bhutto would vie for the presidential elections if no candidate emerged from East Pakistan. Meanwhile, the NAP (Bhashani Group) remained detached, with its leader urging all political parties to back SAC's Eleven Points, citing previous negative experiences with alliances. On January 8, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and three other parties, including AL (Six Points), NAP (Wali Khan Group), and JUI, formed a Democratic Action Committee (DAC) led by Sayyid Nazr al-Islam. The DAC announced plans to boycott elections unless the government accepted its Eight-Point Programme, which includes demands for a federal parliamentary system, direct elections, withdrawal of the state of emergency, restoration of civil liberties, release of political prisoners, withdrawal of political cases, and lifting restrictions on labor rights and press freedoms.¹⁴

After the formation of the DAC, conflicts arose between the objectives of its constituent parties and those of the DAC itself. The DAC designated January 17 as "Demands Day," which saw widespread participation across Pakistan, with meetings and processions organized by regional committees. Despite efforts to maintain order, incidents of indiscipline and inter-party conflicts were reported. In response, the DAC implemented a "code of conduct" on January 21, mandating that constituent parties adhere to DAC objectives, avoid internal conflicts, demonstrate

¹³ Ibid, January 7, 1969

¹⁴ Ibid, January 9, 1969

unity, and clearly communicate the reasons for boycotting elections, all while organizing disciplined demonstrations featuring only the national flag. The events following January 17 were marked by a tragic escalation of violence, beginning with the death of law student Asad al-Zaman when police fired on a protest against Section 144 in Dhaka. This incident catalyzed the Student Action Committee (SAC) to assume control of the movement in East Pakistan, leading to widespread hartals. On January 23, a large torchlight procession took place, and the subsequent day saw a nationwide hartal protesting police violence, involving various societal groups beyond just students. As unrest spread, the military was deployed in multiple cities, with curfews imposed in Dhaka after escalating violence resulted in multiple deaths. The situation deteriorated rapidly, transitioning from peaceful protests to uprisings.¹⁵

The Round Table Conference (RTC) took place in Rawalpindi from March 10 to March 13, with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the National Awami Party (NAP) (Bhashani Group) boycotting the event. Key discussions included demands for representation based on population and the dismemberment of the One Unit in West Pakistan. Mujibur Rahman presented these issues along with his party's Six Points aimed at addressing the country's economic and constitutional challenges. Various leaders supported or opposed different proposals, reflecting a lack of consensus among the opposition parties. On March 13, Ayub Khan agreed to amend the Constitution based on the two key demands, while Mujibur Rahman later distanced himself from the alliance, leading to the dissolution of the Democratic Action Committee (DAC) by Nasr Allah Khan, declaring its mission accomplished.

¹⁵ Holiday, January 28, 1969

After the Round Table Conference, the government established a "constitution-making cell" to draft an amending Bill to incorporate two agreed demands into the Constitution. Lawyers Manzur Qadir and Akhtar al-Din Ahmad helped draft the Bill, but it never reached the National Assembly. Delays were partly due to the Awami League's (AL) extensive constitutional formula submitted to the President's Secretariat, advocating for two confederated states of East and West Pakistan with a sub-federation of four provinces. The formula proposed separate regional reserve banks, centralized tax levies on state governments, and a unicameral legislature with the power to amend the constitution by simple majority.¹⁶

After the Round Table Conference, East Pakistan faced escalating turmoil led by the NAP (Bhashani Group) and the SAC, who intensified the anti-Ayub movement. In March 1969, the SAC's demand for the resignation of Basic Democrats, coupled with Bhashani's threats of violence, contributed to widespread unrest and the breakdown of local self-government. The atmosphere prompted even moderates to adopt radical positions, as pro-India slogans echoed without Muslim opposition. Rural areas saw a complete lack of provincial authority, with proclamations of self-rule from the Awami League. Informal people's courts emerged, subjecting opponents and authority figures to brutal punishments, often with public support and involvement.¹⁷ The AL exacerbated tensions by aligning with the NAP (Bhashani Group) and the SAC, promoting and engaging in violence. Historically, the AL showed greater affinity for these groups than for its DAC partners. In West Pakistan, expectations were that Mujibur Rahman would moderate his extremism

¹⁶ Dawn, March 18, 1969

¹⁷ Rehman Sobhan, East Pakistan Revolt against Ayub Khan, Round Table, July 1969, p, 305

after his release, but he disappointed these hopes. Instead, he sought support from Bhashani and SAC leaders before the Round Table Conference, rejecting compromises with DAC allies and firmly asserting his views there. He condemned opposing Bengali leaders, inciting student protests against them, which led to Mahmud Ali's kidnapping at Dhaka Airport, where he was coerced to endorse Mujib's stance.¹⁸

Amid escalating turmoil in Pakistan, regular law enforcement struggled to maintain order without support from major political parties, many of which were focused on their own agendas rather than collaboration. Ayub Khan attempted to stabilize the situation by appointing new governors and proposing an all-parties peace committee, but faced resistance from key political groups. Concluding that the army was the only entity capable of restoring peace, Ayub Khan eventually relinquished power to General Yahya Khan. Yahya subsequently abrogated the Constitution, declared Martial Law, and pledged to organize free and fair elections soon.

Conclusion

The First stimulus of Bengali regionalism emerged in 1948 when the central government announced Urdu as Pakistan's state language, triggering deep resentment amongst Bengalis. This decision threatened their cultural identity and had significant socio-economic and political implications, leading Bengalis to view it as an attempt by West Pakistani elites to maintain dominance over them. The ongoing neglect of the Bengali language exacerbated their frustration, highlighting that independence did not fulfill their aspirations for freedom and prosperity. The

¹⁸ Dawn, March 25, 1969

demand for provincial autonomy began in 1950 at the Grand National Convention in Dacca and gained traction in the Eastern Wing, particularly following the United Front's victory over the Muslim League in the 1954 East Bengal Legislative Assembly Election. This movement was met with resistance in the Constituent Assemblies of Pakistan, reflecting the growing concern over the potential disintegration of the country. Instead of addressing the issue effectively, the ruling elites mischaracterized the autonomists as unpatriotic and treated them as anti-state figures, failing to implement necessary solutions. Ayub Khan's political system centralized power in the Central Government, excluding Bengalis from decision-making, which clashed with their sentiments. Although significant socio-economic changes occurred, the benefits were primarily enjoyed by the West Wing. Khan's focus on state-building ultimately undermined the essential process of nation-building. The attempt at economic development and centralized authority aimed to unify different groups, particularly the two regions, for a national purpose. However, this strategy instead exacerbated the divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' and deepened the gulf between the two regions. The Bengalis felt increasingly exploited by the power elites of the West Wing under Ayub Khan's regime, leading to rising discontent manifested through strikes, processions, and demonstrations against his centralized and authoritarian governance. A powerful middle class in East Wing engaged in strikes and protests, driven by a new generation of Bengali youth who were more secular and unaware of the partition's sacrifices. Discontent among Bengali leaders and intellectuals due to their exclusion from governance grew, especially after the 1965 War, which highlighted East Wing's vulnerability and fueled regional sentiments. This culminated in the Six Point Formula, which called for provincial autonomy and effectively sought a confederal structure for

Pakistan. Ayub Khan initially underestimated the Awami League's strength and the significance of the Six Point Formula, viewing it as a mere influence of a few radical politicians. When he recognized the threat posed by Sheikh Mujib's policies, he opted for arrest rather than dialogue, employing a militaristic approach instead of addressing the underlying issues. His perspective on Bengali demands was dismissive, perceiving them as mere agitation that did not warrant serious consideration. A brutal policy of persecution transformed the situation into a colonial conflict, leading Bengalis to view the Central Government as an oppressive force. They felt treated as a colony by the West Wing, which fueled support for the Awami League's cause. Discontent with centralized authoritarianism peaked during Ayub Khan's rule, as he alienated Bengalis from political participation, ultimately contributing to the break-up of Pakistan and sparking their revolt against his regime. The revolt against Ayub Khan was a reaction not just to his leadership but also to the central authority favoring West Pakistani interests. Spearheaded by students in the Eastern Wing, the movement indicated a push for independence. Upon his release from jail, Sheikh Mujib recognized a favorable political atmosphere and understood that living in a united Pakistan was not viable.

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