Sheikh Mujib and Deja Vu in East Bengal

The Tragedies of March 25

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Everything must have looked almost the same to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in early and mid-March of 1971 as it did two years previously. As to the immediate future, imposition of martial law, forced cessation of political activity, and even a few firings on protesting mobs of students and workers had become the standard fare of politics in East Pakistan, after all, and would only set things back for awhile. After the hiatus, there would be time enough for continuing the Awami League drive for autonomy. In any event, the election showed that the League was uncontestably the will of the Bengali people, a will that would surely in the end prevail. Preparations, then, were not made for what to do in case the army wanted to do more than merely keep order.

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IN the White Paper that the Government of Pakistan published in August 1971, it is asserted that the Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman plotted in conspiracy with India an uprising that was to take East Bengal out of the Republic of Pakistan.

Reports from the scene indicate otherwise. There were a number of foreign correspondents present in Dacca at the time to cover the talks going on between the Sheikh and President Yahya over the formation of a government and constituent assembly, and there is a consensus among their dispatches that the Awami League could not have made any serious plans for insurrection and secession. As the army was farming out over the city of Dacca to strike in the early evening of March 25, the Sheikh himself was in the process of issuing directives to get the jute exports moving again after the administrative paralysis of early March. When he learned that the army was shooting up the city and hunting down all Awami League members, he waited calmly at his home to be arrested.

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of millions from the country, and the spoliation of the province.

The underlying causes in both sequences were much the same, but the immediately precipitating factors were somewhat different. In November 1968 pent-up resentment at the decade of authoritarian rule of Ayub Khan finally broke loose with a series of student riots in Rawalpindi. Supported by the charismatic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, students and intellectuals elsewhere in the western wing joined in the dissent, and despite Bhutto’s arrest, soon the rebellion spread all over the province.

In December the unrest appeared in the East, and several general strikes occurred, first in Dacca, and then in the province as a whole.

Mujib was in jail at the time as part of the “Agartala Conspiracy Case” that the Ayub government was pressing, charging that Rahman and others had plotted with Indian government officials to detach the eastern wing of Pakistan. Leadership in the anti-Ayub agitation fell to his leftist rival Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who organised and publicised the general strikes.

As 1969 began, opposition leaders from both wings of the country formed a centre-right Democratic Action Committee to conduct more co-ordinated agitation against Ayub, and student groups in East Pakistan converged to establish a Student Action Committee to do the same at the student level. Politicians, students and labour unions all participated in the growing crescendo of general strikes and demonstrations that paralysed the province.

Events in the western wing proceeded at more or less the same pace, and after initial reluctance, Ayub announced on February 1 that he was willing to meet with opposition political leaders at a Round Table conference to discuss the current crisis and possible solutions. Bhutto was released from prison on February 11, and Ayub proposed to allow the Sheikh to attend on parole from prison (meanwhile continuing the Agartala Conspiracy Case against him!).

Bhutto declined to participate and, after some hesitation, Sheikh Mujib refused the offer also, demanding that the charges against him be dismissed altogether. Agitation continued to escalate in the East, and on the night of February 18, thousands of people ignored the army curfew in Dacca and roamed the city, the first such large-scale defiance in Pakistan.

On February 21, Ayub announced that he would withdraw from politics after his present term of office, and the next day he dropped the Agartala case and released Sheikh Mujib. The Sheikh then agreed to attend the Round Table talks (though Bhutto still refused), held on February 23 and again beginning on March 10.

In the second chain of events, Sheikh Mujib was active from the outset. National elections, postponed from their original date in October because of serious flooding in East Pakistan, were held in December, with those elected and 167 of the 169 seats allotted to East Pakistan in the assembly, over half of the country’s total of 313 seats.

The fact that the Awami League had an absolute majority in the assembly upset a number of calculations quite badly. When Yahya agreed to conduct an election in which seats would be allocated on the basis of population, no one thought that the Awami League would win virtually all the seats in the eastern wing. When this did happen, Sheikh Mujib had the chance to form a government strictly confined to his own party, and write his own constitution. Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party, though the largest group from the West with 84 of its 144 seats (including about two-thirds of those assigned to Punjab) could be shut out entirely. On February 15, Bhutto served notice that his party would boycott the National Assembly when it was due to begin meeting on March 3. Yahya faced with the possibility of a constitution that would leave Punjab’s interests out of account, announced 48 hours before the assembly was to meet that the meeting would be postponed.

The mood of the Bengalis changed immediately from euphoria to outrage, Sheikh Mujib called a general strike, which completely paralysed the province for several days and precipitated a number of firings by the army.

Both the anti-Ayub agitation and the smashing electoral victory of the Awami League sprang from the same root, the increasing discontent and resentment in the East over perceived exploitation by the West, especially the Punjabs. During the first 20 years of Pakistan’s independence, the bulk of investment and budgetary resources had gone to the western wing, a disparity that was reflected in differential growth rates.

In the summer of 1968, for example, official figures were released showing that while in the West per capita income had grown from Rs 390 in 1959-60 to Rs 463 in 1966-67, it had increased in the East from Rs 676 to only Rs 313 over the same period. Certainly the fact that much of this western development was financed by the retention of foreign exchange earnings from East Pakistan’s jute exports did nothing to lessen feelings of exploitation. And Bengali underrepresentation in the bureaucracy added considerably to these feelings. Despite repeated official proclamations in favour of parity for the two wings in government service recruitment, East Pakistanis amounted to only 36 per cent of the members of the elite Civil Service of Pakistan in 1969, and in other branches of the bureaucracy, similar disparities prevailed, and Westerms, mainly Punjabis, filled most of the positions.

Against this background, the Awami League’s Six-Point programme for provincial autonomy had great appeal in the East, and it was on the basis of the Six-Points that the Sheikh built his campaigns both times.

In both years, as March began to unfold, the patterns of events became more and more alike. In 1969 the general strike had created an almost complete vacuum of authority in the province. Moslem Khan, the Governor, refused to step outside his headquarters during March, and his authority did not go beyond his office door. Police and civil servants stayed away from their posts, partly in obedience to the strike call, partly out of fear of peasant reprisals against those who had supposedly used their positions under the Ayub regime to exact exorbitant bribes and protection money from the citizenry. Stories of lootings, arson, rape and summary executions by “people’s courts” spread quickly.

Soon, however, it became apparent that the whole province had not become consumed in an orgy of mob violence. The rampages, in fact, were confined to only four of the more than 70 subdivisions of the province. For the most part, the Student Action Committee, with its 300,000 and more adherents under the direction of Tofail Ahmad, a law student at Dacca University, managed to keep the peace. Except for several well-publicised incidents, student “peace committees” were able to keep peasant discontent in check.

In the 1971 sequence, the halt in
bureaucratic activity was even more complete. Immediately after Yahya's postponement of the National Assembly, Sheikh Mujib called for a general strike. He renewed the call several times and then at a mass rally in Dacca on March 7 requested a week-long strike over the whole province. The first evidence of the totality of the response came the very next day, when the Chief Justice of the Dacca High Court (the highest judicial authority in the province) refused to administer the oath of office to Yahya's new Governor for the East, General Tikka Khan. For the remainder of the month, civil servants abandoned their official posts. The province was governed through a series of directives issued from Awami League headquarters. These directives spanned the entire spectrum of public activity from keeping all schools closed to specifying the hours during which banks could communicate with the western wing by teleprinter.

There were numerous charges from the West that mobs of Bengalis were rampaging through both city and countryside in a manner reminiscent of the alleged atrocities of 1969. Non-Bengalis and those who resisted the Awami League directives were beaten, robbed and killed in another orgy of violence, according to government reports. In fact, there does seem to have been considerable violence and even mayhem perpetrated against non-Bengalis after the catastrophic events of March 25, but before that, the Awami League with its student allies had the province under an almost complete parallel government, which kept the peace reasonably well.

As a crowd drawer, Sheikh Mujib has had few equals anywhere. In the subcontinent, where peremptory political oratory is still a widely practiced and popular pastime, crowds of one hundred thousand are not uncommon. Mujib's audiences have been variously estimated at up to two million. Even allowing for the hyperbole that is a part of crowd counting, his popularity has been immense.

His remarkable hold on the public affection did not give him the ability to act as a free agent in either sequence of negotiations with the leaders of the West, however. Just after his release in February 1969, he found that the price of the enormous support he received from the Student Action Committee was the widening of the Awami League's Six Points to include an eleven-point list of student demands. The added points included such items as nationalisation of banks and big industries, and withdrawal from the CENTO and SEATO security pacts, scarcely matters close to the heart of the middle-class oriented Sheikh. In his negotiations with President Ayub at the Round Table conferences, Mujib appears to have found himself rather boxed in by his followers. Ayub is reported to have offered Mujib the prime ministership if only he would moderate his autonomy demands. But if the Sheikh were to retain his political future, the least he could have settled for was full autonomy for the East according to the Six Points (which included provincial control over taxation and assignment of tax revenues to the central government's military forces) and a directly elected legislature based on population. Ayub refused to concede this much, and the Sheikh had to return empty-handed to Dacca in mid-March.

Indeed, there is some indication that Mujib's very freedom from jail was a result of his giving in to the will of his following. Several sources report that at first he was willing to attend the Round Table conferences on parole, but his militant followers would have none of it: he would attend as a free man or not at all. Accordingly, the Sheikh refused to come to Rawalpindi unless all the Agartala Conspiracy charges were dropped.

In 1971 there was a good deal of speculation that the Sheikh's followers would pressure him into declaring independence right away when, on February 28, Yahya postponed the National Assembly meeting. There were certain indications that something momentous would occur at a rally planned in Dacca for March 7. In the event, Mujib steered shy of proclaiming independence. Instead, he demanded that Yahya turn over power immediately to the elected National Assembly, rather than waiting until the assembly wrote a constitution, as specified in Yahya's Legal Framework Order setting up the parallel government, which kept the peace reasonably well.

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crisis, only the 14th Division of the army was stationed in the East, but as the month wore on, C-130 transport planes from the Pakistan Air Force were used to ferry in additional troops, and there were reports of soldiers travelling in civilian clothes being flown across India on commercial flights of Pakistan International Airlines. In addition, several shiploads of troops and equipment sailed the long route around India to reinforce units in the eastern wing.

In 1971 it was again the 14th Division that was on hand in the East when the crisis began to build up. This time it was a good deal more difficult to fly in reinforcements from the West, though. On January 20, several hijackers had forced a plane of the Indian Airlines Corporation to fly to Lahore in West Pakistan, and had demolished the plane after it had landed. In retaliation, the Indian government banned Pakistani overflights, a prohibition still in effect in March. Thus Pakistan had to fly its troops all the way around Cape Comorin to the eastern wing. Still, available planes and ships were pressed into service, and thousands of soldiers were flown in, again in many cases dressed as civilians for the flight.

In sum, everything must have looked almost the same to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in early and mid-March of 1971 as it did two years previously. As to the immediate future, imposition of martial law, forced cessation of political activity, and even a few firings on protesting mobs of students and workers had become the standard fare of politics in East Pakistan, after all, and would only set things back for awhile. After the hiatus, there would be time enough for continuing the Awami League drive for autonomy. In any event, the election showed that the League was uncontestedly the will of the Bengali people, a will that would surely in the end prevail. Preparations, then, were not made for what to do in case the army wanted to do more than merely suppress it.

Instead of reimposed martial law, came catatonia. Karl Marx observed that Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in the world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

Marx may have been wrong as well. Perhaps he should have said, "the first time as tragedy, the second as catastrophe".

NOTES


2 White Paper, p 40.


5 It is interesting to note that the events of March 1969 that put Yahya Khan into power were in many ways similar to those that resulted in Ayub Khan's assumption of power in 1958. See Robert LaPorte, Jr, "Succession in Pakistan: Continuity and Change in a Garrison State", Asian Survey IX, 11 (November 1969), 842-861.

6 A thorough, though somewhat biased, account of the student role in the overthrow of Ayub Khan is given by the expatriate student leader Tariq Ali, who returned from Britain to take part in the anti-Ayub agitation. See his "Pakistan: Military Rule of People's Power", (New York: William Morrow, 1970), esp pp 156-216.

7 Tarig Ali details his role in ibid, pp 174-179.

8 There are a number of accounts of the events of February 18. See inter alia, ibid, pp 207-209; Selig S Harrison, "Ayub's 11th Hour Move Failed", Washington Post, March 31, 1969.

9 The plan for elections and a new constitution was brought out in President Yahya's "Legal Framework Order 1970", which is reprinted in the White Paper, pp 18-33 of the appendix.


13 Wheeler, op cit, p 185. By 1970, this disparity had not changed significantly; see Mason et al, op cit, p 154.


A day-by-day account is given in ibid, pp 29-41; see also "The Present Crisis in East Pakistan", op cit, pp 6-7. President Yahya gave virtually identical charges in both his broadcasts of March 26 and June 28, 1971, both reprinted in the pamphlet "Federal Intervention in Pakistan: A President Explains" (Washington Information Service, Embassy of Pakistan, 1971).


The directives are listed in the White Paper, appendix, pp 37-46.

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27 "New Demands Set By East Pakistan", Reuters dispatch in New York Times, March 8, 1971. Yahya's scenario set out in the Legal Framework Order called for the elected representatives to serve only as a constituent assembly until a constitution was prepared and approved by Yahya himself. Only then would the assembly function as a parliament. See the White Paper, appendix, pp 25-27.


30 In his broadcast of March 26, 1971, see "Federal Intervention in Pakistan", op cit, p 5. A similar, though somewhat confusing ac- count is given in the White Paper, pp 19-20.

31 White Paper, p 20. The "Awami League Draft Proclamation" de- scribing the whole plan in detail is presented in ibid, appendix, pp 47-59.


36 Ernest Weatherall, "Pakistani Fragmentation?", Christian Science Moniter, March 19, 1969. Selig Harrison reported that a whole armoured division was transported in "Ayub's 11th Hour Move", op cit.

37 Macar- enhas, op cit.

38 As might be expected, the Paki- tani government later charged that the hijacking was part of a plot between the Awami League and the Indian Government. See White Paper, p 45.


40 Actually, the country in March 1971 was legally still under the martial law imposed by Yahya Khan in March 1969. After the prol- iferation of Yahya's Legal Frame- work Order of March 1970, though, the practical effects of martial law had ceased to exist.