

Deposing of a Dictator

Revisiting a Magnificent Mass Uprising after 50 Years

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For information, address Samhati Publications,
305 Rose View Plaza, 185 Bir Uttam C R Dutta Road
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e-mail: samhatipokashan@yahoo.com
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Dedication

Professor Quazi Qumruzzaman, an ideologically driven physician who preaches political treatment of socio-economic disparities for the removal of most human diseases
and
Professor Azfar Hussain, a philosophically grounded activist intellectual who weaponises students with libertarian ideologies for the egalitarian emancipation of the humanity.

The inner meaning of history [...] involves [...] an attempt to get to the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events.

Ibn-Khaldun

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. [...] If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act. [...]

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Howard Zinn

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Acknowledgment

I wrote a long essay in 2016 on the historic student-mass uprising that took place across a united Pakistan against the dictatorial regime of General Ayub Khan in the early 1969, resulting in the humiliating ouster of the general and his cronies from the pinnacle of state power in a few weeks of the dramatic beginning of the public resistance following a decade of oppressive silence in society. The essay, a piece of journalistic research, was published in the daily *New Age* under the heading of “Deposing of a dictator: Revisiting a magnificent mass uprising”, in nine installments between December 8 and 18, 2016.

Published in an undemocratic political environment, the essay attracted attention of readers from more than one generation—readers who had actively witnessed the great historical event in the pre-independence era as well as the ones who have heard of and read about it in the post-independence Bangladesh. Many a reader expressed happiness over the objective reconstruction of the historic event and requested for its publication in a book form. Nevertheless, I could not make time to comply, due to my other responsibilities, for it involves certain additional as well as tedious works to convert a long essay into a book—no matter how thin it is.

However, the year 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the historic anti-autocracy mass uprising while the ghost of the Ayub regime has been haunting Bangladesh for quite some years now, particularly with the return of a politically obnoxious slogan of that autocratic regime—development before democracy. The fact remains that democratic freedom

for oppositional activism is a fundamental pre-requisite for genuine developments—social, economic and cultural.

Under such a circumstance, Firoz Ahmed, a bright young leftwing politico-intellectual activist with a keen sense of history, successfully pursued me to transform the long essay into the manuscript of a book. For the book to happen, I have, however, added a new chapter describing the historical contexts of the mass uprising, particularly with reference to the erstwhile East Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh and, before that, a ‘prologue’ explaining the relevance of revisiting the 50-year old political event in our contemporary Bangladesh. Besides, some paragraphs of the essay have been re-written while some new paragraphs of contents have been incorporated here and there into the original text to further substantiate the political and ideological points that the work intends to make regarding the historic event. I sincerely thank Firoz for his persevered persuasion, in the first place.

Some of my friends and well-wishers, particularly Khairul Anwar, Moloy Kanti Saha and Shakhawat Tipu, significantly helped me get certain not-so-available books. I thank them all from the core of my heart for the invaluable help. I specially thank Fauzia Sultana, my wife and partner, whose multidimensional supports remain a constant source of strength in discharging what I believe my ideologically driven responsibilities—intellectual and otherwise. Then, I must thank Abu Jar M Akkas, a competent colleague at New Age, who has taken the trouble to edit the manuscript within a short time and Sabyasachi Hazra for thoughtfully designing the beautiful cover. Besides, I thank Dr Shahidul Alam and Dr. Layli Uddin for providing me with some historic photographs used in the book. Finally, I express my gratitude to the comradely authorities of the Samhati Prokashan, particularly Dipak Roy, for publishing the book with utmost care.

Nurul Kabir
Dhaka, December 2019

Prologue

Restoring confidence in public resistance

Exactly 50 years ago, Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, witnessed a stormy student-mass uprising against a dictatorial military regime in early 1969, eventually resulting in the humiliating ouster of the dictator, a so-called ironman, General Ayub Khan (1907–1974), from the all-powerful presidency of Pakistan in a few weeks. Many things have changed since then—the most fundamental being East Pakistan breaking out of Pakistan as Bangladesh through a glorious people’s war of national liberation against the occupation army of (West) Pakistan in 1971. The pervasive anti-autocracy mass-uprising of 1969 not only did sharpen the democratic political consciousness of the people of the erstwhile East Pakistan, but also contributed substantially to the growth of the Bengali ‘national self-consciousness’ in the East, which would, in turn, unfailingly inspire the people, first, to overwhelmingly vote the Awami League demanding full ‘regional autonomy’ to be the majority party of Pakistan in 1970 and, then, vigorously fighting Bangladesh’s ‘national liberation war’ after the politico-military oligarchy of the West disregarded the electoral mandate in 1971.

However, while the people of Bangladesh have all the reasons to be proud of their hard-earned ‘national independence’, particularly when the country is well ahead of Pakistan in terms of many a globally recognized ‘human development indexes’, the history-conscious sections of the people are generally concerned about the country’s gradual deviation from its

fundamental birth promises—the materialisation of equality, social justice and human dignity.¹ The growing economic inequality, pervasive injustice and violation of human indignity are so visible these days that one hardly needs any analytical data to understand the state’s deviation from the ‘spirit’ that inspired the poor masses to successfully fight the country’s liberation war. Moreover, the ruling class political parties of Bangladesh have utterly failed to institutionalise a democratic system in which power is retained or transferred through free, fair and peaceful elections participated in by all concerned—the immediate reason that the people of this country had taken up arms against the West-based neo-colonialist politico-military oligarchy of Pakistan. Subsequently, the people of Bangladesh have repeatedly undergone civilian autocracy, military dictatorship and pseudo-democracy since the beginning of the country’s independent journey in 1972 while they have now been passing through a politically suffocating time under an extremely authoritarian regime, clinging to power primarily with the partisan supports of the coercive forces of the state. Under such a regime, free and fair elections at any level remain elusive.² Professor Rehman Sobhan finds the past two general elections, held under the ruling League regime in January 2014 and December 2018, ‘far from [being] credible’, for they had ‘hardly been inclusive or conducted on level playing field’.³

The ruthless exercise of unlimited power by the politically unaccountable incumbents has left little space for political opponents to mobilise popular resistance against authoritarian governance, which is bound to leave immense adverse impacts on the social, economic and legal orders of the country. The negative impacts include the degradation of democratic values and subsequent intolerance to opposing views, restrictive surveillances by aggressive intelligence agencies against democratic political as well as intellectual activism, on the one hand, and widespread financial corruption,⁴ the plundering

of public wealth⁵ and the laundering of illegally acquired money,⁶ growth of extreme income inequality⁷ and subsequent hunger or malnourishment,⁸ frequent breakdown of law and order, enforced disappearances of people, particularly political opponents,⁹ extra-judicial murders of crime suspects,¹⁰ et cetera, on the other. What is more dangerous for the people at large is that there is no adequate discussion about the phenomena in the country's mass media, for the incumbents have generated such a fear psychosis across society that most of the media practitioners working in the media industry, both print and electronic, feel extremely constrained to portray the pictures of autocratic political, economic and cultural practices of the pseudo democratic managers of the government and the state—the recent lamentation by an owner of a Dhaka-based old Bangla daily, Ittefaq, remaining to be a burning example of the poor state of the media freedom. In a 'special editorial' published on its 66th founding anniversary on December 26, 2019, Anwar Hossain Manju, son of the reputed founding editor of the Bangla 'daily', Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia (1911–1969), lamented that the Ittefaq, 'which was not mere a newspaper, but an institution to enliven the democratic consciousness' of the people, has now been exposed to 'hostile [political] conditions'. Manju, who is also the top leader of a political party, Bangladesh Jatiya Party, belonging to the Awami League-led ruling alliance, has sought 'forgiveness' of his late father for being 'constrained to uphold the paper's birth-time [democratic] thoughts and ideologies'.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Bangladesh has been ranked lowest among the eight South Asian countries and 150th among 180 countries of the world in the World Press Freedom Index, prepared by the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontiers, which was released in April 2019.¹²

Understandably, with no effective political and intellectual resistance by any quarter against such a repressive political order, economic model of lumpen development and bankrupt

legal system, a pervasive sense of fear has engulfed the entire society. The result is obvious: a people with glorious tradition of putting up successful resistance against tyrannical regimes have these days started taking the present state of affairs for a political ‘destiny’, forgetting the unlimited strength of ‘people’s power’—the ultimate force that changes history.

This is, however, not unprecedented in the history of civilizations that a people passing through certain difficult phases of its journey, particularly with a dictatorial regime, civilian or military, in place, finds putting up organised political resistance against oppression to be an impossible proposition and, therefore, most of the people concerned start believing that the dictatorial regime is there to stay eternally and begin to accept the regime as a *fait accompli*. The dictator, on the other hand, also starts believing that no forces on earth are powerful enough to oust him/her from the pinnacle of state power.

There are, however, instances in history that a small spark of a political, even apparently apolitical, piece of resistance against injustice in society could well ignite a political wildfire of magnificent proportion burning down the fort of dictatorial power, resulting in the ouster of a dictatorial regime at a point of time that even the smartest dictator cannot visualise the fall even days before s/he is ousted. The end of the dictatorial regime of General Ayub Khan in Pakistan, which was caused by a magnificent political upsurge mainly by the oppressed classes of people across the country in 1969, remains such an instance in the history of our sub-continent. The process of the mass uprising across Pakistan began in the first week of November 1968, when the players of the dictatorial regime were still in the jubilant mood of the just concluded celebration of the general’s so-called ‘Decade of the Development’. The people’s uprising reached the climax in the third week of January 1969, resulting in the humiliating ouster of the regime in the last week of March the same year—a political event that the military

‘strongman’ and his political pets were not at all ready for.

Fifty years after the roaring upsurge of the masses that overthrew an apparently all-powerful autocratic regime following a decade of oppressive silence, it is worth revisiting the magnificent event of history in Bangladesh, particularly when the authoritarian oppression of an almost unelected government of Sheikh Hasina has generated pervasive silence by means of unleashing a deep sense of fear across society. The truism that the rulers do not take lessons from history, after all, should not stop the people from gathering courage from the history of their previous generations who had victoriously fought against dictatorial regimes, tyrannical powers and authoritarian governments. Visiting and revisiting the history of the successful people’s movements against the forces of un-democracy, indeed, inject confidence into the people’s mind to put up organised resistance against authoritarian regimes of their own time while restoring people’s confidence in their own power of resistance and their inherent ability to use the power is essential for democratic changes.

The present work, which is a reconstruction of available narratives of the historic anti-autocracy student-mass uprising, underlines immense inherent ability of the apparently ‘powerless’ masses to overthrow an apparently all-powerful illegitimate politico-military regime, if and when the people put up organized resistance under the politically honest and ideologically uncompromising leadership. While the mass uprising in question was an all-Pakistan phenomenon in 1969, the present research has focused, for obvious historical reasons, on the proceedings of the event with an accent on the happenings in Bangladesh, which was known as East Pakistan at the time of the uprising.

The narrative/s of the mass uprising in question constitute a major part of Bangladesh’s history of the struggle for regional autonomy within, and national independence from, Pakistan.

But, unfortunately, the ‘history’ of the great political event has severely been affected by the classed as well as partisan narratives produced and reproduced by ruling-class political parties and their service intellectuals of the country. Efforts have been made here to rescue the glorious anti-autocracy uprising of the masses from the partisan as well as classed historiography of the ruling class that not only plays down the role of ‘ordinary’ masses in creating history, but also unduly lionise some leaders of the political movements and trivialise others for parochial political purposes.

However, while dealing with the principal aspects of the historic anti-autocracy movement in question, efforts have also been made to shed light on a couple of very important political lessons that the great event left behind for the succeeding generations. Firstly, while martyr’s blood serves as the best seed for democratic resistance, a people’s revolt germinated out of that blood may not succeed immediately, particularly in the absence of a revolutionary party of the people to lead the revolt to its logical end for producing cherished results—dismantling of an undemocratic state machine that safeguards discriminatory socio-economic orders, on the one hand, and building up on its debris a democratic state essential for introducing a new egalitarian order, on the other. Under such a circumstance, one dictatorial regime gets ousted in the face of people’s revolt only to be replaced with another of the same, if not worse, kind. The revolutionary mass uprising of East Pakistan in 1969 had, at the forefront, a radical oppositional politician like Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani (1880–1976), who, again, had behind him supports of large sections of peasants and industrial workers from across the East. The rebellious student community, which used to play a pivotal role in advancing the democratic causes of East Bengal those days, played a determining role under the leadership of the Students Action Committee, a political platform of the left and centrist

student organisations of the time, in the uprising while there was no ‘revolutionary party’ in place to lead the massive revolt of the masses to a decisive victory of the people at large. The Left political camp was divided over doctrinal disputes while other political parties, mostly reformists and therefore reluctant to allow qualitative changes, were eager to de-radicalise the mass upsurge and push it towards the dead end of political compromise. The result was obvious: the autocratic regime of General Ayub Khan was ousted on March 25, 1969, but only to be replaced with another military regime, led by General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan (1917–1980), which would soon betray the ‘general will’ of the people manifested through the Awami League’s electoral victory in December 1970 and finally launch a brutal genocide on the people of East Pakistan right on the second anniversary of his illegitimate takeover of power.

Be that as it may, the second important lesson that the mass uprising of 1969 left behind is that the collective political consciousness of a people, raised through a pervasive mass movement for democratic causes, is never lost completely on the process of the progress of history of the people concerned. It was, after all, the collective political consciousness of the East, developed through various political movements against discriminatory political, economic and cultural practices of the West since 1948, in general, and the massive mass uprising of 1969 for democracy, in particular, prompted the East, especially its politically radicalized sections of the youths, to raise the slogan for independence much before the mainstream political leadership had resolved for the same under obvious circumstances in the late March of 1971. Moreover, the peasants and factory workers, and obviously the students, who were politically radicalised through the countrywide student-mass uprising in 1969 and further radicalised through the ‘non-cooperation movement’, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920–1975), protesting at the West’s illegitimate refusal to hand

over power of Pakistan to the East-based Awami League that decisively won the general elections in 1970, were the ones to actively fight the country's victorious national liberation war against the occupation forces of (West) Pakistan in 1971.

Thus, the anti-autocracy mass uprising of 1969 remains a very illuminating political event in the history of the people's struggle for democratic rights that needs to be visited and revisited, particularly in the times of pervasive political pessimism in any country, when people lose hopes for democratic transformation of their state as well as their social, political, economic and cultural relations within the country.

First illegitimate takeover of power in Pakistan A decade of oppressive silence

Pakistan went under its first martial law regime in less than a decade of the republic's coming into existence in August 1947. The first President of Pakistan, Shahibzada Iskander Ali Mirza (1899–1969), issued a 'proclamation' in the midnight of October 7, 1958, which abrogated the Constitution of the republic, declared a 'state of Emergency' across the country, dismissed central and provincial governments, dissolved central and provincial legislatures, banned activities of all political parties and trade union bodies and imposed Martial Law. Besides, President Iskander Mirza appointed the Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army, General Ayub Khan (1907-1974), the Chief Martial Law Administrator of the country. Then, on October 24, he announced a 12-member new Cabinet at the Centre, comprising four generals, including Ayub Khan who was given the Defence portfolio, and eight 'non-political' civilians. It all happened less than six months before Pakistan was scheduled to hold its first general elections in March 1959.

Then, in the twist of political events, General Ayub Khan deposed President Mirza to assume the Presidency himself on October 27. Mirza, who while promulgating martial law three weeks ago wished the politicians to 'quit the country',¹ 'found himself on an aircraft, London bound, and in effect exiled'.² Explaining Iskander Mirza's ouster from power and his subsequent exilement by General Ayub Khan, Ian Stephens, a journalist-turned-historian, writes: "[R]umour had it that

already, during those three weeks after the [military] take-over, he had been up to his former game, trying to play off one important Army personage against another; and that recognition of this was what speeded his exit.”³

Meanwhile, despite this change of guards at the centre of power, the civil-military bureaucratic nexus remained intact in running the affairs of the state. The unholy nexus had dictatorially ruled the country until General Ayub Khan was forced to quit power in the face of a massive people’s uprising for democratic changes across Pakistan in March 1969.

However, the Martial Law came in the wake of a series of scandalous political developments between 1955 and 1958, both in the regions and at the Centre, over the sharing of powers, which were inspired primarily by political opportunism of the ruling class political parties representing the feudal and the urban privileged classes in the West and the rising middle class in the East. Explaining the phenomenon, Abul Mansur Ahmad, a Bengali journalist-cum-senior Awami League leader of the time, writes: “It is the weaknesses of the politicians that paved the way for the Chief of Army Staff to seize state power.”⁴

The self-serving political parties of East Bengal’s under-developed middle class of the day engaged in a series of vulgar conflicts over the retaining of or returning to power, which found clear expression in the crude rivalry between the two major components of the United Front, Krishak Sramik Party and Awami League, on the one hand, and internecine conflict between Awami League leaders, on the other. The bitter rivalry not only resulted in frequent changes of guards in Dhaka and Karachi, particularly between 1956 and 1958,⁵ but also resulted in the death of a Deputy Speaker of East Bengal Provincial Assembly, Shahed Ali, following physical assaults by rioting lawmakers during an Assembly session in September 1958.

The West-based oligarchy of the landed aristocracy and civil-military bureaucracy, which was actually holding the

ultimate authority of the state, played the conflicts of the feuding political camps to its own advantage.

The pro-establishment political class of West Pakistan was not lagging much behind its eastern counterpart in turning the floor of parliament into the stage of ugly battles over the share of power. Indeed, there was no death of any lawmaker due to riot inside the provincial assembly of West Pakistan, but rioting situations did arise there on more than one occasion for the same reasons, one of such horrible situation arose in March 1958. Referring to the incident, the Pakistan Times wrote on March 2, 1958, “[I]mportant party leaders ran amuck, members stood on their seats, shouted en masse, packed the verandas and corridors of the Assembly precincts with tough and strong-armed men. [...] All this commotion occurred not because one party sought to reduce the miseries of the common man and the other tried to add to them. [...] All this infernal row was over a dozen Ministerial chairs, which in the situation prevailing today, are hardly worth the wood they are made of.”⁶ Besides, the chief of the Republican Party and first Chief Minister of West Pakistan, Dr. Khan Abdul Jabbar Khan (1883–1958), better known as Dr. Khan Shahib, was brutally ‘killed in his residence’ on May 9, 1958 ‘by an assailant, which was the result of’, as Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia (1911-1969) writes, ‘the process of the conspiratorial politics nurtured by President Iskandar Mirza’.⁷

Nevertheless, while promulgating Martial Law on October 7, 1958, President Mirza referred to the ‘ruthless struggle for power’ and ‘corruption’ of the politicians, and claimed that the ‘mentality of the political parties has sunk so low’ that he was ‘unable’ to believe that ‘elections will improve the present chaotic internal situations’.⁸ Later, while justifying Mirza’s ouster from power, Ayub Khan said on October 31, 1958 that ‘[t]he feeling existed that Mirza was as responsible for the political deterioration as anyone; it had been his job to stop it’.⁹

It is, indeed, true that the follies of the politicians ‘had paved

the way' for the promulgation of Martial Law, but it is equally true that the civil and military bureaucracy had, meanwhile, developed political ambition to rule Pakistan. The military did not at all come forward to take over as saviours of the public interests as it claimed publicly; rather the purpose was just the opposite to what the military spokesmen publicly proclaimed. Tariq Ali, a Lahore-born British leftwing intellectual, rightly observes: "The main reason for the army's *coup d'état* on October [7], 1958 was the bureaucracy's overriding urge to prevent Pakistan's first-ever general election from taking place in March 1959. The prospect of forthcoming election had increased the growing restlessness of the masses, and this had tempted the leaders of the opposition parties into making a number of sweeping promises of radical reform. [...] Any elected government of Pakistan would have had to make concessions to this manifestation of public opinion. [...] And an elected government would also have had more confidence to combat the influence of bureaucracy, and to establish civilian control of the army."¹⁰ Altaf Gauhar (1923-2000), a civil servant would become a close confidant to President Ayub Khan, notes that 'Mirza openly ridiculed the idea of elections'.¹¹

However, the military regime of General Ayub made all out efforts to instill fears of repression into the people's mind that they would face in case of expressing any dissent, political or otherwise, against its arbitrary rule. The ruthlessness of the regime against democratic dissent found clear expression in the brutal treatment of a leftwing student leader of Mymensingh, Kazi Abdul Bari, who organised a protest procession against Martial Law in Mymensingh soon after its promulgation on October 7. The martial law authorities in East Pakistan arrested Bari and a military tribunal sentenced him to punishment of 10 lashes for leading the procession against martial law. Eventually, 'Bari was caned for 10 times that turned him deaf forever'.¹² The message of military brutality in case of

any dissent was very loud and clear. Then, again, another student leader of Rajshahi University, Kazi Abdush Shahid, was sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment by a military tribunal for protesting against General Ayub Khan's visit to Rajshahi in 1962. Even a schoolboy of the Dhaka city, Hayat Khan, was mercilessly caned and then sent to prison for protesting against the autocratic rule of the Ayub regime.¹³ Thus, the Ayub regime used to make all-out coercive efforts to enforce an oppressive political silence across the country.

Meanwhile, as if to celebrate its first anniversary in power, the dictatorial regime introduced the infamous concept of Basic Democracy in October 1959, the objective of which was to consolidate political power by way of removing the traditional politicians from the country's political scene.

The Basic Democracy, better understood as a 'representational dictatorship', introduced a five-tier system of 'elected' councils created at different administrative units of the state, such as union, sub-division, district, division and province, to run the affairs of the state in collaboration with the civil and military bureaucracy. Under the system, elections were held to create basic councils in January 1960. The 'elected councils' were not, in fact, fully elected, for a hierarchy of councils nominated by the government was 'superimposed on the basic councils'. The Basic Democrats, 80,000 out of a total population of 100 million, were dubbed as the Electoral College to elect the President, the National Assembly and the Provincial Assemblies. The 95.60 per cent of the Electoral College, thus formed, 'voted' to ratify Ayub Khan's presidency on February 15, 1960.

The Ayub regime, which was eager to depoliticise society, barred the political parties from contesting the Assembly elections with their political-ideological identity. Moreover, in order to banish particular politicians of its dislike from the country's political arena, the regime issued a repressive rule,

Election Bodies Disqualifying Order, which infamously came to be known as EBDO, under which some politicians having ‘allegations’ of corruption against were barred from political activism, including contesting elections, till 1966. The EBDO ‘victims’ included a former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892-1963), and two former Chief Ministers of East Pakistan—Abu Hossain Sarkar (1894-1969) and Aatur Rahman Khan (1905-1991). Some of the politicians, Suhrawardy and Sarkar for example, contested the corruption allegations in the martial law tribunals, but failed to come out clean, for the military regime acted as both prosecutor and judge. The military regime arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on charges of corruption and picked up Moulana Bhasani, who had never held any public office, without any allegation of corruption and dictatorially kept him behind bars for four years.

Meanwhile, the student bodies of the East, particularly its leftwing Student Union, the student front of the East Pakistan Communist Party, campaigned against the so-called concept of ‘Basic Democracy’, in general, and the idea of participating in the non-party Assembly elections for establishing the farcical system, in particular. The Student League, the student front of the East Pakistan Awami League, initially argued that the ‘political parties believing in politics of constitutionalism should participate in the elections, even if the present Constitution is an anti-people one—conducive to nurturing of dictatorship’.¹⁴ The Student Union, which took a ‘principled’ stance on the issue, continued to campaign against the farcical elections. Eventually, the Student League joined in, and the candidates of the two major parties of East Pakistan, the Awami League and the National Awami Party, abstained from participating in the elections in question.¹⁵

Under the circumstance, the Electoral College of the Basic Democrats ‘elected’ the National Assembly, a body of 156 members, on April 28, 1962 and ‘elected’ the Provincial

Assemblies of two regions of Pakistan on May 6, 1962. The 'elections' to the Assemblies were held under the close supervision of the civil and military bureaucrats who ensured that the 'ciphers' of General Ayub Khan 'were elected as a majority'.

Then the National Assembly met on June 7, 1962 and in order to make sure that the Opposition in the National Assembly does not create any political embarrassment for the pseudo-elected regime, Sardar Bahadur Khan (1908–1975), younger brother of Ayub Khan, was made the Leader of the Opposition. The Assembly incorporated the entire package of the Basic Democracy into a new Constitution drafted by a 'Constitution Committee' formed in March 1962, by the majority of votes on June 8, 1962. The Martial Law was 'officially' lifted with the commencement of the new Constitution on June 18, 1962 although the practice of dictatorial governance would continue for years ahead.¹⁶

The mainstream politicians of the East were yet to gain enough strength, moral and organisational, to mobilise public opinion against the undemocratic Constitution. Still, a total of nine political leaders of the East's different political parties of different ideological colours jointly 'rejected' the Constitution on June 25, 1962, terming the document to be 'unworkable', for there was no provision in the Constitution in question seeking to remove 'economic disparity' between the two regions of Pakistan.¹⁷ The leaders in question demanded the framing of the Constitution by a national council elected on the basis of universal franchise.

Meanwhile, Bahadur Khan, an old Muslim Leaguer who was politically active in the Pakistan movement, found his elder brother's reign unpalatable, for it was 'inconsistent with the spirit of democratic aspirations of the Muslim community that they had fought for the creation of Pakistan'. He refused to hide his political frustration under Ayub regime and, therefore,

stated in National Assembly on June 27, 1962, as the Lahore-based daily *Civil and Military Gazette* reported the next day: “We feel betrayed. Never before was corruption so rife, the administration so weak and the people so demoralized as at present. [...] We are governed not by a popular or representative government. A ruthless minority presides over our destiny. [...] The answer to the grave political situation lies in the return of power to the people and the restoration of their inherent rights.”¹⁸ Bahadur Khan even went to the extent of saying that if he had known before that Pakistan would be exposed to such circumstances, he would have given a second thought to working towards achieving Pakistan. The result was obvious: Bahadur Khan was stripped of his status as the Leader of the Opposition shortly thereafter.

Nevertheless, more than three years into the Martial Law, the politically conscious sections of the people started becoming unhappy about the autocratic regime, for the Martial Law authorities had imposed restrictions on the citizens’ right to register any collective protest against the anti-people government policies. But political activism of the opposition camp, which is the prime means of voicing people’s sentiment, was banned under Martial Law. The East Pakistan *Krishak Samity*,¹⁹ which had just begun its movement for the peasants’ rights to the cultivable lands, fishermen’s rights to the water bodies, fair prices of jute and other agricultural products, et cetera by holding a huge peasants rally at the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city in September 1958, was also banned. The martial law authorities sealed off the *Samity*’s head office in Dhaka.²⁰ The Communist Party, which was entirely outlawed, was forced to go underground. Besides, the Awami League resolved to comply with the Martial Law regulations restricting political activism, which would become evident in an entry of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s prison diary on July 25, 1966, where he recollects: “We did not engage in political activism during

Martial Law. We kept silent, for political activism was illegal those days.”²¹ It was, however, not the Sheikh and his party that kept politically silent during the martial law, but also the Communist Party pursued the same course those years. Dr. Mahbub Ullah, who was a prominent leftwing activist in the early 1960s and a top-level leader of the student movement in 1969, later recollects, “The [Communist] Party leaders were even against the idea of participating in university hall union elections by the leftwing Student Union those years, least that would amount to the violation of martial law while the supporters of the Student Union contested union elections in violation of the party resolves.”²² Mahbub Ullah also writes that the Communist Party was for bringing out a ‘silent procession’ inside the Dhaka University premises to mourn the Language Movement martyrs of 1952 on February 21, 1960 while Anwar Zahid, then a leftwing student leader, chanted a pro-democracy political slogan in the procession in violation of the party decision. The slogan, however, instantly influenced all the participants and the ‘silent procession’ immediately turned politically loud’.²³

However, with the political parties still unprepared to break martial law, the democratically oriented sections of the intelligentsia, politically conscious cultural activists and the student community came forward to actively defy certain undemocratic resolves of the military regime, which would eventually serve as the prelude to a greater political movement for democracy in the days to come.

The first such defiance of Ayub regime’s cultural agenda came from the secular democratic sections of the Dhaka intelligentsia, when a section of the illiberal as well as pro-establishment intellectuals started opposing the idea of celebrating the birth centenary of the Nobel Laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Thakur (1861–1941) in the Muslim majority East Pakistan in May 1961. The Dhaka based Bangla daily,

Azad, which turned out to be the representative voice of the illiberal Muslim intelligentsia in question, published a good number of editorials and articles against the idea of celebrating Thakur's birth centenary. Besides, some Bengali members of the Pakistan Lekhak Sangha, an East-West literary platform launched with General Ayub's direct patronization in January 1959, appeared very active in the pages of *Dainik Azad* against Thakur's literary works. They projected Rabindranath Thakur, born into Brahma faith,²⁴ to be an anti-Muslim writer and asserted that the celebration of his literary works in East Pakistan would amount to be acting against the spirit of the Pakistan ideology.

The left and liberal democratic sections of the East Bengal intelligentsia, on the other hand, recognised Thakur's enormous contributions to the growth of Bangla language and literature, and found it important to uphold the liberal democratic spirit of many of his works for the sake of further growth of Bengali nationalism. They, therefore, took the challenge and celebrated the centenary with elaborate programmes in April–May of 1961, which included a two-day colourful programme at the Dhaka University's Central Students Union and a four-day programmes undertaken by the 'Citizens Committee', headed by Justice S M Murshed (1911–1979) and Prof Khan Sarwar Murshid (1924–2012), that organised a couple of literary seminars on the universal appeal of Thakur's works while everyday programme was concluded either with recitation form Thakur's poems, singing of his songs or staging of his plays. Besides, the Dhaka-based left and liberal democratic journalists of the time also celebrated Thakur's birth centenary by arranging symposium on Thakur's works, staging his plays, exhibition of his books, et cetera. Professor Syeed-Ur Rahman, a reputed researcher on the history of cultural movement in Bangladesh, writes: "The series of seminars, symposia, literary competitions, recitations of poems, staging of plays, dance-

drama and musicals that took place for three months to celebrate Thakur's birth centenary in East Pakistan, in fact, generated a new life in the otherwise lifeless cultural sphere of the province [under martial law]."²⁵

The non-secular groups would, however, revive the issue a few years later, first in 1965 and then again in 1967, and those times with the active cooperation of the state machinery controlled by the Ayub regime, first by way of imposing a ban on airing songs of Rabindranath Thakur by the country's state-run radio and television during the war between Pakistan and India in September 1965 and then 'reducing the broadcasting of Rabindranath Thakur's songs as far as possible' in 1967. The secular democratic sections of the Bengali intelligentsia of the East would put up successful resistance against the communal efforts of the West-based powers that be.

In the times of political barrenness of the early 1960s, a group of left-wing Bengali academics, most of them economists, came forward to articulate the disappointment of the people of East Pakistan over 'economic disparity that was deemed to originate in the undemocratic and unjust nature of the Pakistan State ruled by an elite of West Pakistani generals, senior bureaucrats, feudal landlords and affluent businessmen, where Bengalis were excluded'.²⁶

The academic debate on the economic disparity between the two regions of Pakistan began particularly after the West Pakistani Deputy Chairman of Pakistan's Planning Commission, Saeed Hasan, made a false claim in a radio-talk in Dhaka in 1961 that 'there is no longer any economic disparity between East and West Pakistan' and that 'East Pakistan is rather receiving more financial allocations than West Pakistan is getting these days'.²⁷ A cross section of the East's rising middle class, such as businessmen, industrialists and politicians, joined the Bengali academics in refuting the West Pakistani claim.

However, in the process of the debate in the early 1960s,

the Bengali academics concerned projected, individually as well as collectively, the existence of discriminatory ‘Two Economies’ in one country, through which the East was being systematically exploited by the West while some of them started publicly contesting Islamabad’s propaganda that a stronger West Pakistani economy would serve the ‘engine of growth’ to stimulate the economic development in East Pakistan.²⁸ Eventually, as the Ittefaq-famed Manik Mia writes, “President Ayub Khan was forced to admit that [given the present state of affairs,] removal of the regional economic disparity would not be possible before 1985.”²⁹

This was the time, again, that the Bengali academics in question started putting forward the argument for a political solution to the economic problem—a complete regional autonomy. For example, Rehman Sobhan, a young economist teaching at Dhaka University those days, argued at a seminar in West Pakistan in October 1961: [I]f full regional autonomy was not conceded to East Pakistan and disparities continued to grow over the years, this would, in the future, jeopardize the integrity of Pakistan.”³⁰

The progressive Bengali intellectuals in question thus continued to provide fresh theoretical perspectives for the economic autonomy of the East since the early 1960s, which would enormously help the leftwing and the nationalist political forces of East Pakistan to effectively carry forward the mass movements based on precisely formulated charter/s of demands for the region’s autonomy in the second half of the decade.

While the decade of the 1950s ended in despair, the beginning of the 1960s ushered in new hopes in the East, for in the absence of effective opposition against General Ayub Khan’s military regime by the political leaders, the left and centrist student bodies took to the streets against the dictatorial rule in early 1962.

The leaders of the two student bodies—East Pakistan Student League led by Shah Moazzem Hossain and Fazlul Huq Moni (1939–1975) and the East Pakistan Student Union led by Badrul Haque and Kazi Zafar Ahmed (1939–2015)—resolved to launch a student movement against the military regime on February 21, 1962, which was the tenth anniversary of the historic Bangla language movement.³¹ The student movement, however, commenced a little earlier than it was originally planned due to the arrest of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in Karachi on December 30, 1961, for the leaders of the two student bodies resolved to jointly enforce a student strike in Dhaka University on February 1 in protest against Suhrawardy’s illegal arrest.³² This was the first organised political action against the military rule in Pakistan since the promulgation of Martial Law in October 1958. Two other student bodies of the time—the Student Force, a party-independent centrist student body and a faction of the National Student Federation, a group affiliated to East Pakistan Muslim League, joined the movement within a short time.

However, the regular protest processions within the university campus continued to draw more and more supports of the general students while slogans like ‘down with martial law’ were appearing on the Dhaka city walls. In the face of growing momentum of the student movement, the government closed Dhaka University *sine die* on February 5. The agitating students clashed with police the next day. Then, again, the protesting students held a huge rally in the university campus against Martial Law on February 7, after which they brought a big protest procession out of the campus in the densely populated old part of the Dhaka city. They clashed with the police in different streets of the city while the movement spread in different districts outside the capital Dhaka in the next two days and demands like an end to martial law, framing of democratic constitution, freedom of expression and regional autonomy started getting included in the slogans of the agitating students.

In the process of the growing movement, a large number of ordinary people joined in the anti-martial law agitation while the government was forced to release Suhrawardy on March 27. This round of student movement eventually fizzled out after the student leaders and activists, who were arrested during the agitations, were freed from prisons in a few weeks of Suhrawardy's release.

The next round of the student movement in the East began in July 1962 in demand of the scrapping of the recommendations of the Ayub regime's 'national education policy'.

The report of the Ayub regime's National Education Commission, headed by Professor S M Sharif, better known as the Sharif Commission, came to light in late 1961.³³ While the Sharif Commission made certain recommendations that went particularly against the undergraduate students of the time, the guiding principle of the recommendations was anti-people, in general, and detrimental to the interests of East Pakistan, in particular. For example, the Commission observed that 'the people usually depend on the government to have primary schools free of cost and high schools at the minimum cost', and concluded that 'the idea of free education is nothing more than an idle imagination'.³⁴ Besides, the Commission proposed an increase in the graduation course by one year, which would prevent many students, particularly of the East, from completing the degree due to poverty. Moreover, the Commission recommended that 'Urdu has to be made the language of the people at large, instead of the language of a few', and that a common 'national language for Pakistan' should be in place while 'the Arabic Naskh-style script should be introduced' for writing the common language.³⁵

The politically conscious student bodies of East Pakistan rightly identified the proposed education policy to be a 'reactionary' one, because the recommendations, if implemented, would have stood in the way of the dissemination

of higher education among the poor, on the one hand, and the flourishing of the Bangla language and literature, on the other, which, again, would further accelerate the neo-colonial political, cultural and economic exploitation of the East by the West of Pakistan. The student organisations, particularly the leftwing Student Union and the centrist Student League, therefore, resolved to take to the streets to push for the scrapping of the 'reactionary' education policy. Again, the Student Force and a faction of the National Students Federation joined the movement in a short while.

The student bodies agitated in and outside educational institutions across the East for more than three weeks while people from all tiers of society started joining the protest processions. Then, the student bodies called a general strike for September 17, 1962, the first-ever strike called by any quarter since General Ayub's illegal takeover of power in October 1958.

In observance of the strike, the student bodies brought out a militant procession of several thousand students from the Dhaka University campus in the morning and ordinary people started joining the procession in good numbers while it was approaching towards the secretariat building. The movement reached its peak as police fired shots in the tail of the long procession from behind, killing instantly two participants—Babul and Mostafa, the latter a poor bus conductor—and injuring many others. Of the injured, Wajiullah, a poor domestic help, would die in hospital the next day. The agitated students engaged themselves in clashes with the law enforcement agencies and they fought pitched battles with the police for the whole day while hundreds of ordinary city dwellers joined the protesting students. Dr. Hannan, a researcher of the history of Bangladesh's student movement, writes: "Some 250 people with various injuries were admitted to the city hospitals that day while 95 per cent of them were poor city dwellers. Even the

ordinary boatmen from the other side of the river Buriganga, on the eastern bank of which is situated the Dhaka city, came to participate in the protests with their oars in hand.”³⁶

The government immediately imposed a ‘legal’ bar on rallies and processions in the evening and deployed gunwielding military troops in the city. But the students as well as ordinary city dwellers were not in a mood to give up. The student leaders, therefore, met political leaders of the opposition camp, including Huseyin Shaheed Suhrawrdy, to request them to launch a ‘greater movement’ against the military regime. But the political leaders in question, who did not dare take to the streets for democracy during the entire period of Martial Law between October 1958 and June 1962, refused to go beyond issuing a ‘press statement’ against police atrocities against the students.³⁷

Having failed to secure supports of the still fearful political parties to take the struggle for democracy to a new height, the student bodies announced a three-day mourning for the martyred from September 18, with a Gaybena Janaza at the Salimullah Muslim Hall premises of Dhaka University and a post-Janaza mourning procession in the city the same day. Suhrawardy even refused to attend the Janaza; he rather chose to see the Governor of East Pakistan, Ghulam Faruque Khan (1899–1992), the same day,³⁸ reportedly for pursuing the latter to release the arrested student leaders and activists from prisons and, thus, containing the movement.

The students of West Pakistan held a few demonstrations in some of the cities like Lahore and Karachi,³⁹ but did not get much involved in the education movement. The imposition of the Urdu language or the Arabic Naskh-style script, after all, was not a big problem for the West while poverty was primarily an East Pakistani concern.

The students of the East continued their movement on their own while a significant section of ordinary people continued

to support the student movement across the East. Under the circumstance, the government announced the 'postponement' of the implementation of the Sharif Commission's 'on the third day of the students' uprising'.

Inspired by the 'partial victory' of the struggle, the student bodies held a huge 'student-mass rally', first of its kind in the country, at the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city on September 24, 1962 to press home the demands, but the movement lost momentum for the time being, primarily due to the non-cooperation, if not obstruction, by the opposition political camp.

However, most East-based newspapers supported the democratic cause of the student movement, which had prompted the autocratic regime of General Ayub to have a repressive ordinance—Press and Publication Ordinance—promulgated in 1963, by which the regime continued to suppress media freedom and by implications the freedom of expression of people. Besides, in order to punish the university students critical of his autocratic governance, Ayub Khan had promulgated another repressive ordinance—University Ordinance—in 1964, under which 'university degrees of some protesting students were cancelled'.⁴⁰

The education movement in question resumed 'for a while' in December 1964 when the Ayub regime constituted another commission, headed by Justice Hamoodur Rehman (1910–1981), to review the Sharif Commission's recommendation on education reforms. However, before the movement gained enough momentum, the student bodies had been exposed to a new challenge—putting up effective opposition to the re-election of Ayub Khan to Pakistan's presidency, based on the so-called Basic Democracy, in January 1965.

The opposition parties of both the East and West of Pakistan forged an all-out alliance—Combined Opposition Party—and managed to convince Fatima Jinnah (1893–1967), respected

sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, to contest for the presidency. Three student bodies—Student Union, Student League and Student Force—actively joined the electoral campaign against that of General Ayub Khan.

Nevertheless, General Ayub ensured his presidential re-election for a five-year tenure by means of massive manipulations of the electoral process—first in constituting the electoral college of 80,000 Basic Democrats in November 1964 and then in conducting the presidential polls against Fatima Jinnah on January 2, 1965. Even the General's favourite information secretary, Altaf Gauhar, would admit later that the whole electoral process was a tragic farce. He writes that 'the whole election was now reduced to an administrative exercise to ensure Ayub's victory' while the 'administrative exercise' included 'buy[ing] as many of the elected members as possible'.⁴¹

Understandably, the democratic forces of Pakistan, in general, and those of the East, in particular, started feeling suffocated under such an undemocratic political system and a manipulative electoral process. Meanwhile, East Pakistan's socio-cultural resistance against the ruling West's attempts to subjugate the Bengali language and literature, intellectual discovery of the economic colonisation of the East by way of sustaining 'two economies' in one and political activism of the student bodies for democratic order, et cetera had significantly contributed to the sharpening of the political consciousness of the Bengalis about the essentiality of a full regional autonomy, for it would help the East to a large extent shape its own political, economic and cultural destiny even within the framework of Pakistan.⁴²

The phenomenon found concrete expression in the 14-Point programme that the National Awami Party, led by Moulana Bhasani, adopted in June 1965. The programme included the demand for the 'full autonomy for East and West Pakistan

under a federal system of governance', in which 'everything but defence, foreign affairs and currency would remain the jurisdictions of the provincial governments'. The Moulana's programme also included 'reorganization of Pakistan's defence system with the Naval Headquarters being transferred to the East'.⁴³

Meanwhile, Pakistan got engaged in a war with India over Kashmir in September 1965 and the war ended after a UN-mandated ceasefire was declared following a diplomatic intervention by Moscow and Washington. Nevertheless, although much of the war that had lasted for 17 days was fought in Kashmir and along India's border with West Pakistan, it exposed serious vulnerability of the East in terms of security from external threats, for there was hardly any military force posted to the East during the war. The issue of maintaining a militia or para-military force in the region, therefore, entered the East's demand while the East's aspiration for political and economic autonomy found concrete expression in the Six-Point programme that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had announced in February 1966.

The Sheikh's programme, 'based on the Lahore Resolution' of the Muslim League, included the introduction of a 'federal system of governance' with two 'sovereign parliaments' in East and West Pakistan in which 'everything but defence and foreign affairs would remain the jurisdictions of the federative states'. The programme also included an 'economic autonomy' under which 'two provinces would have two easily exchangeable currencies as well two state banks to be controlled by the two provincial governments'. Alternatively, in case of maintaining a single currency for whole of Pakistan, the Sheikh proposed the introduction of a 'federal reserve system' in which two 'regional federal reserve banks' would 'devise measures to prevent the transfer of resources and flight of capital from one region to another'. Besides, the Sheikh's programme,

formulated after the East's defence vulnerability was exposed during the Indo-Pak war in 1965, proposed raising as well as maintaining 'a militia or para-military force' for the initial defence of the federative states from external attacks.⁴⁴

The Ayub regime reacted sharply to the Sheikh's Six-Point programme. Despite the Sheikh's repeated argument that the materialisation of the Six-Point programme would strengthen the ties between East and West of Pakistan, General Ayub branded it to be a 'secessionist programme' and publicly threatened on March 20, 1966 that if the Awami League pressed for the programme, the government would respond in the 'language of weapons'.⁴⁵ Then, on March 29, the General said that 'any constitutional changes as regards provincial autonomy would be jeopardising' and advised that the 'every East Pakistani should prove to be a better Pakistani' and 'help consolidate the national solidarity'.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the Sheikh and his Awami League then undertook a public campaign across East Pakistan to drum up support for the Six-Point autonomy programme while it began to capture the imagination particularly of the Bengali middle classes. Subsequently, the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan resorted to repressive measures against the political campaigners of the East's autonomy.

The level of the regime's autocratic behaviour found clear expression in the illegal arrest of the Sheikh for eight times in 35 days of his campaign until he was finally put behind bars under the Defence of Pakistan Rules on May 8, 1966. Then, on a court order, he was released from prison on January 18, 1968, but only to be arrested again at the jail gate the same day, and this time as the prime accused in the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case, in which a total of 35 Bengalis, civilian and military, were charged on the allegation of attempts at separating the East from the West of Pakistan.⁴⁷

Earlier, following the Sheikh's arrest, the government also

put behind bar some other top-level League leaders, including Tajuddin Ahmad (1925–1975). Subsequently, the party called a province-wide dawn-to-dusk general strike for June 7, 1966 to press home its demands for the implementation of its autonomy programme as well as the release of its leaders. While a significant section of the student community and the industrial labourers of the Dhaka city and its adjacent areas, particularly Narayanganj and Tangi, took to the streets in support of the strike, the Ayub regime brutally responded to the pickets and demonstrators. Even by the government admission made in an official ‘press note issued in the evening, 10 demonstrators were killed in police firing.⁴⁸ Moreover, in order to suppress the details of police atrocities and actual number of casualties, the government imposed strict censorship on newspapers against publishing any other narrative of the political event than the ‘press note’ issued by the government. Protesting at the imposition of the censorship, the Sangbad, a progressive Bangla daily of the time, refrained from publishing its June 8 issue.⁴⁹

Be that as it may, the government then arrested up to third-tier leaders of the League by June 13, picked up Manik Miah, editor of the Ittefaq, a popular Bangla daily which was sympathetic to the Awami League those days, on August 15 and closed the newspaper the next day.⁵⁰ The government even forfeited the Ittefaq’s printing plant, New Nation Printing Press, under the so-called Defence of Pakistan Rules, on August 17.⁵¹ The governing party even denied the opposition in the national assembly, which was in session in the West, any scope to take up the issue of the June 7 killings in the East for discussion in the House. Instead, the government continued to arrest leaders and leading activists of the other opposition parties who were for a truly democratic dispensation in the country and, thus, enforced an intimidating silence in the entire opposition political camp.

Under the umbrella of such a pervasive political silence enforced by multi-dimensional coercive means, the Ayub regime resumed its communal as well as racist cultural politics that it launched in 1961—the politics of suppressing the Bangla language and literature by way of imposing restrictions on Rabindranath Thakur’s literary and musical works.

The regime imposed ban on broadcasting Thakur’s song by the country’s state-run radio and television during the Indo-Pak war in September 1965, which was resumed, in a limited form though, in the face of protests of the educated sections of the Bengalis after the war had been over. This time, while addressing a session of National Assembly on June 20, 1967, Abdus Sabur Khan (1908–1982), a Bengali politician belonging to the Ayub-led Muslim League (Convention), ‘expressed concerns’ over the ‘penetrations of foreign culture into East Pakistan’ through ‘celebrations of Bangla New Year and Rabindranath Thakur’s birth anniversary’ and observed that such ‘penetration’ of foreign culture ‘hits the foundation of Pakistan’ created out of ‘Islamic way of life’. Then, again, in response to a query from another Bengali legislator, Dr. Alim-al Razi (1925–1985), the East Pakistani Urdu-speaking Information Minister of General Ayub’s government, Khawaja Shahabuddin (1898–1977), informed the House on June 22 that ‘the broadcasting of Rabindranath Thakur’s songs has already been reduced as far as possible’ and ‘broadcasting of Thakur’s works to the extent considered to be detrimental to the ideology of Pakistan would be banned completely in the future’.⁵²

The reaction in the East was obvious. A group of 19 well-meaning Bengali intellectuals found the government stance ‘unfortunate’ and jointly asserted on June 24, 1967 that ‘the spectacular opulence that Rabindranath’s literary works have provided to the Bangla language and the depth as well as sensibility that his songs have provided for our emotions has become an inseparable part of the cultural entity of the Bangla-

speaking population of Pakistan'.⁵³ Besides, Moulana Bhasani came out strong against the Ayub regime's communal cultural policy. In a public statement on June 27, 1967, the Moulana said: "Rabindranath [Thakur] has enriched the Bangla language and taken it to new heights by his poems, prose, short stories, plays, novels and songs. He has made universal contributions." Then, explaining that there was nothing anti-Islamic about Thakur's literary works, the Moulana said in the same statement: "Islam has preached truth and beauty. Rabindranath has held high the truth and beauty enshrined in Islam. Those who are attacking Rabindranath in the name of Islam, therefore, do not really believe in Islamic principles of truth and beauty."⁵⁴

However, such statements of the Bengali politicians and intellectuals were hardly of any significance to General Ayub and his politico-intellectual circles, in the first place, for the General did not believe that the people of East Pakistan were culturally equal to those of the West, and that the dissenting Bengali intellectuals were of worth to be paid any serious attention to. The general clearly wrote in his autobiography published in 1967: "East Bengalis, who constitute the bulk of the population [of Pakistan], probably belong to the very original Indian races. [...] [T]hey have been and still are under considerable Hindu cultural and linguistic influence. As such they have all the inhibitions of down trodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new-born freedom."⁵⁵ He also believed that the people of East Pakistan could not find them equal to those of the West and, therefore, needed to be 'catered for' and 'helped so as to feel equal partners'. Evidently, General Ayub's attitude towards the people of the East was racist and his patronising tone colonialist. To Ayub Khan, the Bengali intellectuals critical of his martial law regime were not *insan*—human being; he rather found them to be *haiwan*—beasts.⁵⁶

It was, therefore, not suprising that the Ayub regime,

while having dictatorially ruled the country since 1958, not only distorted the country's political process of representative democracy, in general, but also continued to actively oppose the East's historically legitimate political demand for autonomy, an end to exploitative as well as discriminatory economic policies against the Bengalis and the sound growth of the Bangla language and literature. Under the circumstance, the politically conscious sections of the East's political forces rightly identified the political, economic and cultural phenomena to be the manifestations of the West-based regime's neo-colonialist attitude towards the Bengalis of Pakistan while most of them found solution to the problem in ousting the Ayub regime from power, on the one hand, and securing a 'full autonomy' for the East, on the other. Some sections, however, believed that complete separation from the neo-colonialist West was the only solution.⁵⁷

There were, indeed, grievances among the people of the West as well, for the democratically oriented sections of society found the situation politically suffocating due to the absence of the freedom of expression while the poorer sections of the people were exposed to severe disappointment due to growing social and economic inequalities within the West. Notably, while critiquing an extremely exploitative model of economic growth out of a 'primitive' type of 'capitalism' prevalent in Pakistan, Dr. Mahbubul Haq, the West Pakistani 'chief economist' of Pakistan's Planning Commission at the time, revealed on April 21, 1968 that 'two-thirds of Pakistan's total industrial assets, 80 per cent of banking and 79 per cent of insurance assets were already being controlled by an oligarchy of only 22 families' of Pakistan,⁵⁸ of which 'only one family belonged to East Pakistan those days'.⁵⁹ While the first part of the revelation created repercussion among the poor majority of Pakistan, including its West, the second frustrated particularly the rising middle class of the East.

Nevertheless, despite such growing economic as well as social inequalities and the political as well as ideological polemics on the ways and means of getting rid of the autocratic regime in the opposition political camps of Pakistan, in general, and those of the East, in particular, there was still no visible sign of putting up any decisive resistance neither in the East nor in the West. Comfortable with the pervasive political silence across Pakistan, a happy Ayub regime undertook huge social, political and cultural programmes to celebrate what it hypocritically branded as the 'decade of development' in 1968.

However, the deafening political silence would be breaking soon. The spark of a well thought-out protest against autocracy in the East and an apparently spontaneous one in the West would create a wildfire of agitation across the country, burning down the throne of the dictator within no time.

Breaking the silence aloud Legitimate anger bursts into the streets

The political resistance against the dictatorial regime of General Ayub Khan began in both East and West Pakistan almost simultaneously, in November 1968, but without any coordination between the movements of the two regions of Pakistan. While the movement began in the West with a politically unplanned and apparently apolitical protest by a few teenage students against an unjust piece of repressive police behaviour in Lahore, it started in the East arguably with a politically thought-out plan to put up an organised public resistance against the oppressive politico-military establishment with a view to establishing a truly democratic order.

Usually, it was always the student bodies, and that too those of the East, who came forward to put up the first large-scale resistance against any autocratic political or cultural practices of the ruling classes of Pakistan since its birth in 1947—the state language movement in 1948 and 1952 as well as education movement in 1962 and 1964 being a few examples. This time, while initiating the decisive struggle for democracy against Ayub's autocratic regime, the student bodies of East Pakistan were taking a little time in formulating a comprehensive and common charter of demands incorporating the political, economic and cultural aspirations of people, which they would successfully come up with in the first week of January 1969. The decision of the student bodies to wage a united movement would eventually play a decisive role in deposing the Ayub's

autocratic regime.

Nevertheless, as the student bodies of the East were preparing to launch their movement, the peasants and workers of East Pakistan struck the first blow under the leadership of Moulana Bhasani, president of the National Awami Party (NAP), for ousting the oppressive Ayub regime from power. The Moulana, a left wing political leader who, to the embarrassment of his own image of an ever-oppositional politician, had been keeping himself from the streets for a few years allegedly due to Ayub regime's expansion of foreign relations with the socialist states, particularly China, meanwhile, rediscovered himself and returned to his usual self. That the Moulana was rediscovering his original oppositional self became evident when he categorically said at the Awami Party's special council session on November 30, 1967: "The dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan represents the interests of Pakistan's comprador class of the big bourgeoisie supported by the American imperialism and the feudal land-owning class. The American imperialism, the big bourgeoisie and the feudal aristocracy are one and inseparable. The people of the country could, therefore, establish a genuinely democratic government only by putting an end to the rule of the three forces in question. [...] Under the circumstance, the movement for democracy and the movement against imperialism [and feudal aristocracy] cannot be separated from each other."¹

Nevertheless, the Moulana had taken a year since then to launch a movement against the Ayub regime. Yet, he was the first well-meaning politician of the opposition camp, particularly with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remaining behind bars in the Agartala Conspiracy Case those days, to resolve to take to the streets with the objective of dethroning General Ayub and his associates. The Moulana called upon the people to initiate a decisive movement against the Ayub regime in Dhaka on November 3, 1968—three days before the students in

Rawalpindi rose to rebellion on November 6 that year.

Mohammad Farhad (1938-1987), a leader of the pro-Moscow East Pakistan Communist Party those days, writes: “Moulana Bhasani announced at a public rally in the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city on November 3, 1968 that the fall of the Ayub regime was imminent and called upon the people to start a *gherao* movement [by laying siege to government offices]. The Moulana also asked the government to ‘let East Bengal separate [from West Pakistan] if you cannot solve problems that the East has been suffering from’.”² Then, again, the Moulana ‘called upon the people at a roadside rally in the Dhaka city on December 1, 1968 to oust General Ayub from power by *gherao* movement’,³ asked the people to observe ‘Repression Resistance Day’ on December 6 and announced a public rally in the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city, to be followed by ‘besieging the Governor House in Dhaka’, to observe the day,⁴ which would eventually begin the process of the mass uprising against the powers that be across East Pakistan.

Meanwhile, three days after the Moulana’s first call for initiating a decisive movement in the East for deposing the Ayub regime on November 3, an apparently trivial incident of police excess on a group of apparently apolitical students in Lahore on November 6 spontaneously sparked a serious anti-autocracy movement in the West.

The beginning of the movement in the West was apparently so humble that the government of Ayub Khan initially did not even take serious note of it, albeit without realising that the couple of small sparks of protest here and there would soon turn into the wildfire of a massive people’s uprising sealing his political fate forever.

Describing the background of the people’s upsurge in West Pakistan against the autocratic regime in 1969, Professor Abdul Halim, a Bengali researcher, writes: “The students and

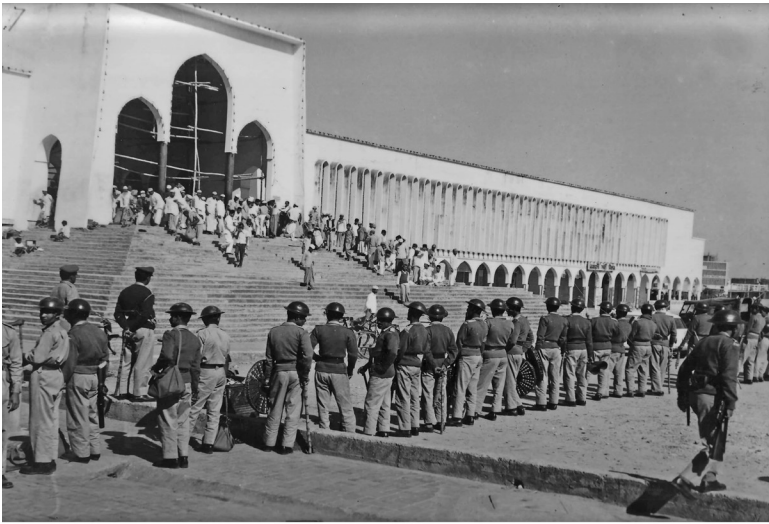


Moulana Bhasani leading a procession towards the Governor's House in Dhaka on December 6, 1968. Photo: Rashid Talukder

the ordinary citizens clashed with police in Rawalpindi over a trivial incident in early November 1968 that resulted in the death of a student in police firing, and subsequently a general strike was observed successfully at the call of the agitating students. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1928–1979) supported the protesting students while his support enraged Ayub Khan and ordered Bhutto’s arrest. The arrest contributed to popularizing Bhutto on the one hand and spreading of the movement in every nook and corner of West Pakistan on the other. [...] Ayub Khan started losing public support in West Pakistan quickly. The movement in West Pakistan also influenced that of the East.”⁵

Haider Akbar Khan Rano, a prominent leftwing political activist of East Pakistan during the mass uprising of 1969, writes: “The anti-Ayub movement began in West Pakistan in November 1968, when the political situation in the East was relatively calm. But, eventually, the movement in East Pakistan generated a mass uprising against the autocratic regime in January 1969.”⁶

The narratives provided by Halim and Rano about the beginning of the movement appear a little misleading, for they ignored the fact of history that Moulana Bhasani had already started holding public rallies and mobilising people in East Pakistan against the West-based ruling politico-military oligarchy, led by General Ayub Khan, right in November 1968. The authors in question are only partly correct in that the student community of the East took to the streets after the students of the West had so done. Farhad, then a young prominent leader of the pro-Moscow Communist Party, recalls that ‘a vigorous student movement took a pervasive turn’ in West Pakistan in November 1968 ‘while the student movement in East Pakistan was yet to begin’.⁷ The students of the East would rise to organised rebellion in January 1969 and democratic movements of the one region would continue to influence those of the other until the ouster of General Ayub autocratic regime.

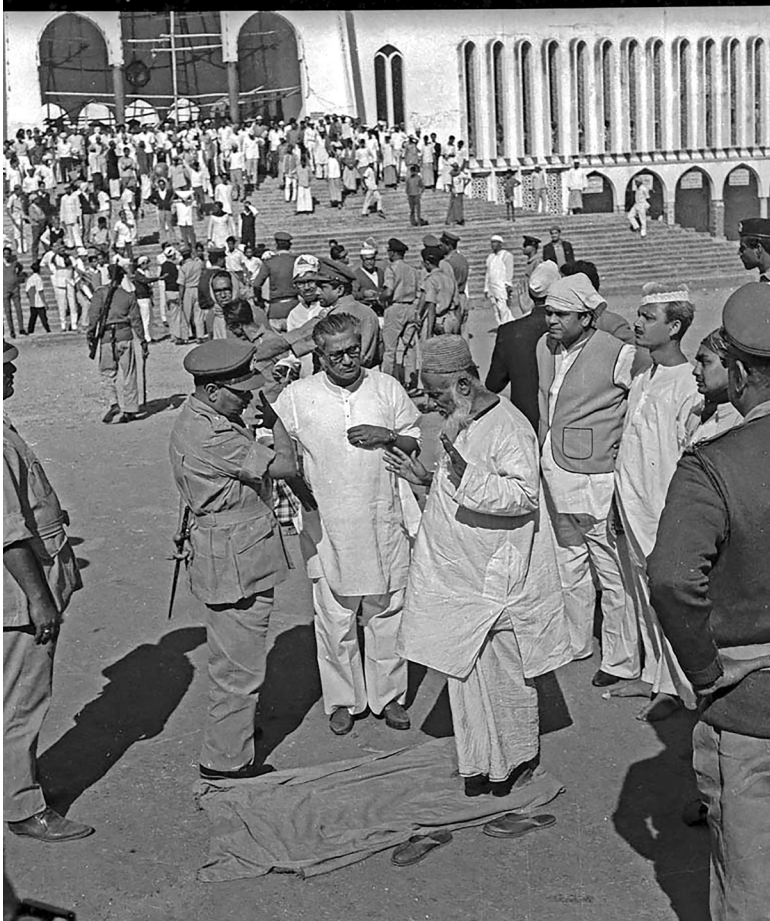


Police standing guard in front of the Baitul Mukarram Mosque in the Dhaka city against any attempt by the people to take to the streets violating a ban on processions and gatherings on December 7, 1968. Photo: Rashid Talukder

Tariq Ali, a Lahore-born British leftwing political analyst, describes the particular ‘trivial’ incident that sparked the revolt against the Ayub regime in West Pakistan in specific details. He writes that ‘as some 70 students, most of them from Gordon College in Rawalpindi, were returning from Landi Kotal’, a supermarket some 25 miles north of Peshawar in North West Frontier, with some ‘forbidden’ ‘imported goods’ worth ‘Rs about 5,000’ on November 6, 1968, the police ‘confiscated’ the articles and ‘charges were brought against’ the students in question. This ‘small act of repression triggered off a revolt’.⁸

The students of the Gordon College met in a room of the college hostel the same night and resolved to hold a demonstration the next day. Tariq Ali writes: “The next morning a General Assembly was called and three thousand students gathered. They not only protested against the Landi Kotal repression; student after student assailed the Ayub regime itself, and pointed out that where Ayub and his family had been expropriating the wealth of the nation for the last ten years, the seventy students had only bought Rs.5,000-worth of goods at Landi Kotal. It was decided by a large majority to take a demonstration out to the local Commissioner (the leading bureaucrat) and to make a protest there. It was also decided that the students should also welcome Bhutto on his arrival at Rawalpindi.”⁹ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Chairman of the Pakistan People’s Party of the opposition camp, started making positive impression among the people of West Pakistan those days and the ‘growing tide of anti-Ayub manifestations’ was taking ‘the form of mass attendance at Bhutto’s meetings’.

However, the ‘mood’ of the protesting Rawalpindi students was ‘restless’, which found expression in their street demonstrations on November 7. Tariq Ali recalls: “Every official car with a flag was stopped, the flag was removed and anti-Ayub slogans were shouted at the occupants. The limousine carrying the Chief Election Commissioner, the

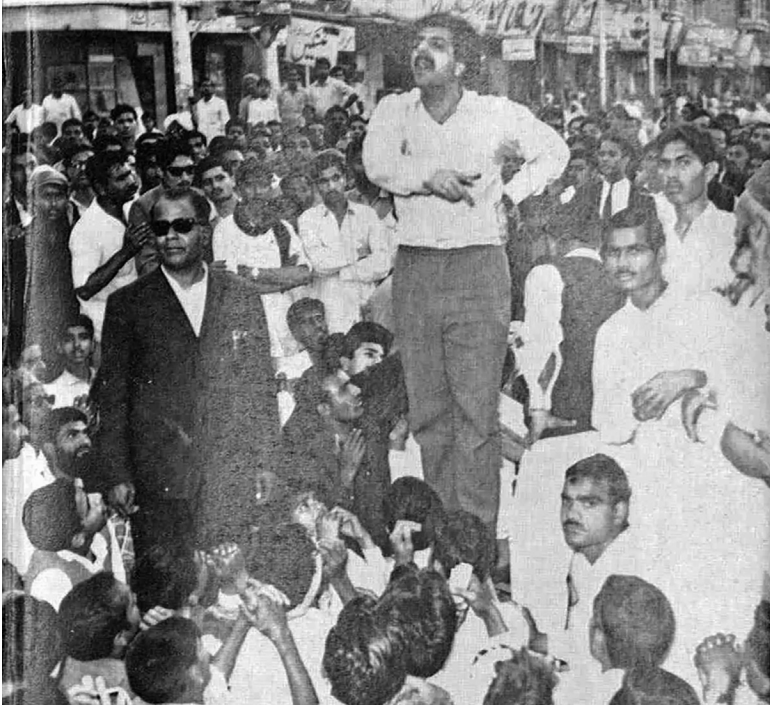


A police officer trying to stop Moulana Bhasani and his followers from taking to the streets in front of the Baitul Mukarram Mosque premises of the Dhaka city on December 7, 1968 while a defiant Moulana starts saying prayers on the street only to be joined in by a few hundred people in no time who would bring out a procession against the Ayub regime after the politically charged prayer was over. Photo: Rashid Talukder

man who was to help rig the General's next election, was stopped and the bureaucrat's ears were pulled after which he was allowed to proceed on his way. There was no police opposition at this first demonstration, although the students were unprecedentedly aggressive. Considering the repressive nature of the dictatorship, it was a striking display of student power."¹⁰ Rawalpindi, otherwise 'a politically dead city' with 'no political tradition', suddenly 'came back to life' by the student activism in question.

Meanwhile, in response to an invitation by a group of the polytechnic students to speak, Bhutto, on his way to Rawalpindi, stopped at the institution the same day, but the local administration stood in the way. The students reacted sharply. The 'Commissioner fled' and the agitating students 'tore off the Deputy Commissioner's trousers and spanked him' as he came out to face the protesters, and then moved towards the Hotel Intercontinental, where Bhutto was scheduled to rest on his return from the Polytechnic. Police refused to allow Bhutto to address the Polytechnic students and, therefore, he left the Polytechnic premises for the hotel, where the local students were waiting for him much to the dislike of the police deployed there. Suddenly, the police opened fire, 'without any physical provocation' on part of the students, killing a 17-year college boy, Abdul Hamid, on the spot. Enraged, they fought back with paving stones and brickbats resulting in injuries on both sides. The police eventually managed to disperse the students for the day and the government immediately closed down all the schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and vacated all the student dormitories.

The students vacated the dorms but refused to leave the city. They rather contacted and coordinated among the students unions and regrouped the next morning. Some ten thousand students assembled in the city centre and they resorted to violent protest against Ayub's autocratic regime.



Tariq Ali, a left-wing student leader of West Pakistan, addressing an anti-autocracy protest rally in Lahore in November 1968. Source: Tariq Ali's book—*Pakistan: Military Rule or Peoples Power*.

Tariq Ali reminisces: “For the first time Ayub’s portraits were burnt publicly in Rawalpindi; every shop-front displaying a photograph of the dictator was smashed and within a few hours not a single photograph could be seen in the main centres of the city. Private cars were stopped, and the passengers forced to get out and shout anti-Ayub slogans, or kicked in the arse if they refused. [...] The students were joined by members of the general public and many unemployed workers, and they clashed with the police at regular intervals.”¹¹

The next day, police shot dead two ‘bystanders’, one of them a poor clerk, whom the law enforcers ‘recognized as having taken part in the previous demonstrations’. Moreover, police reportedly ‘dragged the two bodies through the streets as a deterrent to future demonstrations’. Besides, police arrested several student leaders to contain the movements.

Nevertheless, the death of the college student in police firing provoked ‘solidarity demonstrations’ in different cities of West Pakistan including Multan, Karachi, Jhelum, Lahore, Peshawar, Hyderabad and Gujar Khan. Moreover, in the midst of student protests and police actions, a young student, Hashim Umar Zai, shot at President Ayub Khan while the latter was to address a public meeting in Peshawar on November 10, 1968. The young boy reportedly fired two shots, but missed his target as Ayub instantly ‘hid behind the sofa on the platform’ and ‘stayed crouching behind the sofa’. The young boy was arrested immediately. Later, while admitting ‘guilt’, he reportedly said that ‘he was sorry that he had not succeeded in killing the tyrant who had oppressed the people for so long’.¹² The General immediately left the meeting for Government House—‘shattered and shaken’. Subsequently, the government arrested some opposition leaders, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Wali Khan (1917–2006), on November 13, under the Defence of Pakistan Rules, accusing them of ‘inciting the masses, particularly the students’—an act that was ‘prejudicial to public

safety and the interest of Pakistan'. Besides, some leaders of the student movement were also detained. Altaf Gauhar, the powerful Information Secretary of the government of Ayub Khan, later observed that the arrests 'only added fuel to the fire'.¹³

Tariq Ali writes that the 'uprising leaped from one town to another'. The protesting students called a general strike in Rawalpindi for November 29 and called upon 'workers, small shopkeepers and unemployed to march with them'. The protesting students of other cities synchronized with the programme. Women had also started taking to the streets in different parts of the West. Ali writes, 'A hundred women marched a hundred miles from Sargodha to Lahore to join a protest against the government'.

Meanwhile, in Rawalpindi, the workers actively responded to the student call and there was a complete general strike in the city: "The entire population, it seemed, had come out on the streets to link arms with the students. It was the police who decided to start the battle. In what appeared an unnecessary use of force, the police lashed into the gathering crowd of bystanders to clear the streets. Hundreds of demonstrators at once turned and pelted police with a shower of stones and bricks."¹⁴

The battles had continued for several hours, in which the 'joint student-worker platoons' attacked several police stations and set alight a couple of them. Eventually, the Army was called out to contain the situation, but the 'movement spread like an uncontrollable conflagration to reach East Pakistan, hundreds of miles away'.

The student bodies of East Pakistan took a little time to launch a well-organized movement against Ayub's autocratic regime this time. Nevertheless, the student community of the East had already started expressing solidarity with their agitating counterparts in the West in November. For example,

three Dhaka-based student bodies, left and centrist, organised a rally at the Baitul Mokarram mosque premises in Dhaka on November 19 in protest against the police atrocities on the students of West Pakistan.¹⁵ The post-rally procession, which was terminated at the historic Bahadur Shah Park of the Dhaka city¹⁶ ‘was spontaneously participated by a good number of ordinary people.’¹⁷ The people’s participation in the procession in question was a primary sign of pent-up popular anger against the Ayub regime, which would soon find expression in a magnificent mass uprising for democracy and justice in the last week of January 1969.

Moulana rouses the masses An uprising in the making

While the student bodies of the East were formulating their common charter of demands to start their historic movement, the East Pakistan's Union of Journalists held a joint rally of the Dhaka-based journalists, newspaper employees and hawkers at the Press Club premises on December 1, 1968 to press home a set of democratic demands that included 'media freedom, scrapping of [autocratic] press ordinance, stoppage of the media censorship, materialisation of the fundamental rights of the citizens and the release of the political prisoners'. The rally over, 'the journalists, newspaper employees and hawkers concerned brought out a huge procession that paraded the Dhaka city streets and finally staged a demonstration in front of the Governor House'.¹ More significantly, Moulana Bhasani went ahead with his programme to lay siege to the Governor House in Dhaka for December 6, 1968. He put forward a set of demands of the peasants and industrial workers, on the one hand, and a 'full regional autonomy' for East Pakistan, on the other.

Before starting the procession towards the Governor House, the Moulana addressed a huge public rally, attended by, alongside urban NAP supporters, several thousand peasants and industrial workers belonging to the party's affiliated peasant and labour bodies—Krishak Samity and Sramik Federation respectively.² The Moulana also announced a general strike in the Dhaka city for December 12 to continue with the movement

for realising the demands.

As the police intercepted the post-rally procession advancing towards the Governor House in the afternoon, hundreds of protesters had clashed with the law enforcers till the evening. It was a Ramadan day and the Moulana, along with some of his followers, returned to the nearby Baitul Mokarram mosque to break fast and say the Maghreb prayers. Meanwhile, some leaders of the auto-rickshaw drivers' union, which had already called a transport strike on their own in the Dhaka city 'to protest against regular police harassments of its members over driving licences' for December 7, arrived in the mosque premises to urge NAP leaders, particularly the Moulana, to call a general strike in the Dhaka city for the next day in solidarity with their movement. The Moulana, who had already called a general strike for December 12, hesitated a little, but eventually responded to the auto-rickshaw workers positively.³ Immediately after the Moulana's announcement in the evening of December 6, 'several thousand people brought out a procession to drum up supports of the city dwellers for the general strike for the next day'.⁴

Meanwhile, instead of making efforts to address people's grievances by way of meeting their just demands, General Ayub Khan, who was visiting East Pakistan that week, told journalists in Dhaka on December 6 that he had 'no intention to remain President forever', but remarked that 'demonstrations against his administration' was a 'heinous crime' on part of the opposition and that his government was 'not worried of such demonstrations'. The same day, Ayub's puppet Governor of East Pakistan, Abdul Monem Khan (1899-1971), threatened the opposition with 'stern actions'.⁵

However, in a bid to foil Moulana's general strike, the government slapped Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, imposing a ban on the assembly of 'five or more' people in any part of the city on December 7. Nevertheless, the



An anti-autocracy procession of the protesting people after Moulana Bhasani addressed a huge political rally in the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city in January 1969. Photo: Unknown

auto-rickshaw drivers picketed in the city streets in favour of their strike while other sections of city dwellers observed the strike ignoring the government order. Moreover, they clashed with the police at different points of the Dhaka city while police opened fire in some places. In the process, a young shopkeeper, Ishak, was injured in police firing and a Class IV employee of the government's Water and Power Development Authority, Abdul Majid, died of the bullet injury, contributing further to the fuelling up of people's anger against Ayub regime.

Meanwhile, Moulana Bhasani arrived at the Baitul Mukarram premises in a rickshaw at around 12:00 noon, and thereby a few hundred people gathered around him. The armed members of Police and Para-military East Pakistan Rifle who were standing guard around the premises came forward and made attempts to disperse the people gathered around the Moulana. Subsequently, the event took a dramatic political turn. Haider Akbar Khan Rano, who was present at the venue, vividly recollects: "Suddenly, the Moulana took off his shawl, spread it on the road like a prayer mat and called upon the people around to join him to offer a *Gaebana Janaza* for [the salvation of the souls of] those killed in the police firing. Several hundred people followed the Moulana and stood in for the prayer. The law enforcers, completely flabbergasted, were forced to allow the [politically charged] religious ritual to take place in violation of the ban on gathering of more than five people in a public place. After the prayer, Moulana announced that he would violate the government ban on procession and started walking. Several thousand people followed him. Under the circumstance, a non-Bengali police constable holding an automatic rifle advanced towards the Moulana, who instantly shouted at the policeman, saying *Khamosh* [—an Urdu/Hindi word for 'shut up']. The old Moulana also held the constable's gun by the hand—a scene that I had never witnessed. [...]. However, a non-Bengali officer took the constable away. The

Moulana led the procession for a while and finally announced another general strike for the next day—December 8, 1968.⁶

The Dhaka city witnessed an all-out general strike on December 8 while Abdul Majid, an employee of the Water and Power Development Authority and Abu Mia, a cycle mechanic, were killed in police firing in the Dhaka city. Some other cities of the East also experienced sporadic clashes between the police and Anti-Ayub protesters. The same day, *Holiday*, a Dhaka-based English language radical democratic weekly of the time, welcomed the Moulana and his National Awami Party for their ‘recent corrective measures’. The weekly observed that ‘the Moulana [...] had rediscovered himself in the Paltan Maidan rally’ while ‘his indictment of the regime was unambiguous; his programme of the people down-to-earth and his call to wage a relentless struggle against oppression—political and economic—cannot be missed by the countless sufferers’.⁷

In the evening, the Moulana issued a press statement, terming the government of Ayub Khan ‘so brutal that it even resorted to attacks on religious rituals like offering *Janaza* for the dead’ and said that such a ‘government must be overthrown by any means for the sake of establishing people’s democracy’.⁸ He also called another general strike across the province ‘to protest against police firing on the people’ for December 10.

The next day, on December 9, Ayub Khan made a vindictive statement in Dinajpur town of the East, saying that the Moulana’s ‘movement was detrimental to Pakistan’s integrity, independence and sovereignty’ and issued a ‘stern warning’ against such political activism.⁹

Given a couple of consecutive successful general strikes, the one on December 10 was not as successful as the previous ones in the Dhaka city. Still, the strike was not ignored: protest processions were brought out in many a district town. Nevertheless, journalists of East Pakistan observed a newspaper strike on the day in solidarity with their West Pakistani

counterparts to stand by a Rawalpindi based journalist, Naeem Shaid, 'who was shot at, and seriously wounded' by, as Tariq Ali writes, one Sher Bahadur, a pro-Ayub gangster controlling some 'five hundred thugs' indulged in attacking the 'student demonstrators and workers on strike' in the city those days. Shaid had been reporting on the misdeeds of the gangster. Subsequently, the entire Pakistan passed December 11 without any newspaper. Meanwhile, the Awami League came forward to join the people's movement initiated by Moulana's National Awami Party, and two leaders of the Awami League, A H M Kamruzzaman (1926–1975) and Syed Nazrul Islam (1925–1975), issued a statement on December 1, calling upon the people of the East to observe jointly with the Awami Party a 'day of resistance against repressive policies' of the government on December 13.¹⁰ The people at large had observed 'Resistance Day', which eventually became a programme of all the opposition parties of the country, successfully defying the previously imposed government ban on assembly and procession in the Dhaka city.¹¹

The student organisations of East Pakistan were yet to be ready to take to the streets. They would launch a decisive movement on January 17, 1969. Tariq Ali rightly observes, "Probably this was the first time that the student movement of Dhaka had been bypassed politically by other social layers."¹² That the student bodies were up to forging a greater unity against the dictatorial regime of General Ayub Khan, however, found expression in a 'joint statement' issued on December 29 by the top student leaders of the time, alleging that 'the government is out to destroy the democratic rights of the student community by means of repressive measures'. The statement, jointly signed by the Vice President and the General Secretary of the Dhaka University Students' Union as well as the presidents and secretaries general of the two factions of left-wing Students Union and the centrist Student League, emphatically said that

‘the student community will not tolerate the government’s interference with their democratic rights’.¹³

Nevertheless, the Moulana had meanwhile introduced a new technique in the mass movement, laying siege to government offices, ranging from the offices of the Deputy Commissioners in district headquarters to those of the Circle Officers at the Thana level, to realise their demands, which would come to be known as ‘gherao movement’ in the political history of the people of East Bengal. The NAP officially announced on December 14 that the Moulana would start a countrywide gherao programme—besieging the anti-people institutions—in the last week of the month. Accordingly, the Moulana addressed a huge public rally in the Pabna Town Hall ground on December 29, and raised various public demands including East Pakistan’s autonomy. The rally over, several thousand people marched towards the Deputy Commissioner’s residence under the leadership of the Moulana, kept the DC’s house gheraoed for some time and handed over to the latter a charter of people’s demands. Thus began the gherao movement against the Ayub regime,¹⁴ which would soon be reinforced by the active participation of the students, workers and peasants against the incumbents.

Meanwhile, the left-wing Krishak Samity besieged a government office at Hatirdia under Narshingdi district to press home some legitimate demands of the peasants on December 29 while police fired shots at the protesting peasants, instantly killing three farmers—Mia Chan, Hassan Ali and Cherag Ali—and School teacher, Siddiqur Rahman.

Then, Moulana Bhasani resolved to deepen the political struggle for democracy against the oppressive regime by way of expanding the town-based movement to rural areas, and for that to happen the Krishak Samity, of which the Moulana was the president, called upon the peasants on January 1, 1969 to launch effective movements in their respective ‘rural areas’

from January 8 to January 15 to press home the Samity's demands for 'fair price of agricultural products, annulment of the provision for issuing certificate cases and body-warrant against the peasants, fair price of agricultural labour, introduction of modern irrigation system for agricultural growth, waiver of land taxes for the sections of peasants who are victims of river erosion', et cetera.¹⁵ The leaflet, signed by its joint secretary, Abdul Matin (1926–2014), which the Krishak Samity distributed among the rural population of the East, clearly observed that 'the movement against the autocratic government, which is limited solely in the urban areas, would not end the exploitations of the entire masses' and, therefore, called upon the peasants to 'hold protest rallies and resort to gherao movement', which means laying siege to the political, economic and administrative centres of exploitation, 'in rural areas' across the province.¹⁶

Notably, the Purba Pakistan Krishak Samity, founded by Moulana Bhasani in January 1958, had played a decisive role in generating 'national self-consciousness' among the peasants across East Pakistan. The Moulana's leftwing colleagues in the organisation had enormously contributed to political radicalization of the hitherto conventional land rights-based peasant movement, which, in the process, generated political awareness of the need of East Pakistan's autonomy and socialist system among the rural population, in general, and the peasantry, in particular, through hundreds of peasant conferences and political rallies over a decade and a half particularly since 1957.¹⁷ The 'phenomenon', as Syed Abul Maksud observes, 'brought in qualitative changes in the conventional politics by way of forcing the bourgeois political parties to talk about the problems of the peasantry, and even adopt some socialist slogans'.¹⁸

However, during the week-long programme to besiege the government in rural areas, the Moulana and his leftwing colleagues addressed dozens of peasants' rallies and

demonstrations in rural areas. While addressing such a rally at Hatirdia in Shibpur district on January 13, the Moulana threatened the government that ‘if necessary, the payment of taxes would be stopped to materialise the demands for the full regional autonomy [of East Pakistan], general elections based on universal franchise and economic rights of the people’.¹⁹

Side by side drawing the peasants into the political struggle for democracy, Moulana Bhasani and his left-wing colleagues in his National Awami Party successfully mobilised the oppressed industrial workers and neglected employees in the movement. Rano recollects that Moulana Bhasani ‘substantially contributed to taking the political movement beyond the boundary of the middle class’. He writes, “The Moulana appealed to the peasantry and the industrial workers to actively participate in the movement and the result of the appeal became visible in February and March. The workers entered the political scene in February while peasants rose in revolt in March.”²⁰

The Moulana, a leader of the poor masses, had always been in touch with oppressed classes of the people. He actively served as the president of East Pakistan Railways Employees League for three years since 1949. He also served as the president of East Pakistan In-land Water Transport Workers Union during the same time. Besides, he became an elected president of the Adamjee Jute Mills Union in March 1954. It was at the Moulana’s initiative that his leftwing National Awami Party floated its labour front, Purba Pakistan Sramik Federation, in early 1966 with Mohammad Toaha and Sirajul Hossen Khan as its president and general secretary.²¹ For many years, the Purba Pakistan Sramik Federation was the umbrella organisation for most of the trade unions of East Pakistan’s industrial workers.

But, with the internecine conflict over political, ideological and organisational issues, the left political camp in question faced repeated fragmentation and, thereby, the labour body continued to be divided in the 1960s. For example, Deben

Shikdar and Abul Bashar broke away from the pro-Peking East Pakistan Communist Party and formed their own labour front, Jatiya Sramik Federation, in 1967. Besides, another breakaway faction of the same communist party, the Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries of East Bengal led by Kazi Zafar Ahmed, Haider Akbar Khan Rano and Rashed Khan Menon, launched its labour body—Purba Bangla Sramik Federation—in May 1969. Moreover, the leftwing Sramik Krishak Samajbadi Dal formed its separate labour organisation—Sangjukta Sramik Federation—with Saidur Rahman and Ruhul Amin Kaisar its president and general secretary, in August 1969. The pro-Moscow faction of the East Pakistan Communist Party, on the other hand, worked among the industrial labours and launched its own labour front—Trade Union Centre—on November 12, 1969 with Harun-or-Rashid and Saifuddin Ahmed Manik as its president and general secretary.

However, all this leftwing parties and groups, who politically cultivated the industrial workers, peasants and student community, played a vital role in the struggle for regional autonomy, on the one hand, and political, economic and cultural rights of the oppressed classes of the people, on the other. Despite differences of opinion among themselves, the left factions in question remained very active on different fronts during the political movement against the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan. Rano, presently a top leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, rightly recalls: “The Lefts and the Communists played the most active role in the mass uprising of 1969.”²²

The Awami League, which was otherwise ‘the largest political party of the time’²³, with ‘its prime support bases remaining in the [Bengali] middle class, petit bourgeoisie and the growing class of the Bengali rich’,²⁴ did not have any organised strength among the peasantry and the industrial workers those years, nor was it interested in separately organizing those

labour forces. The League, which was preaching broad-based ‘Bengali nationalism’ in the second half of the 1960s, did not even have any peasant organisation during the entire period of the united Pakistan; its peasant front, Bangladesh Krishak League, came into existence in the post-independence Bangladesh in April 1972. Similarly, the party did not have any organisation among the industrial workers until the fag end of the Pakistan era. The Awami League used to believe those days that ‘the labour-union-centric activism was the business of the Left’ while ‘most trade unions of the time were formed and politically controlled by the left camps’.²⁵ Moahammad Toaha, a leftwing labour leader and a member of the East Pakistan’s Provincial Assembly from the Awami League at the time, writes that ‘the central working committee of the East Pakistan Awami League even adopted a resolution in 1956, moved by its general secretary’, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was then the Minister for Commerce, Labour and Industries in the provincial government of Aatur Rahman Khan, ‘barring the Awami League workers from being involved in the labour movement’.²⁶ Besides, ‘in order to curb the Left influence over the industrial workers, the Sheikh had even ‘secretly assisted Fazlul Quader Chowdhury’ (1919–1973), a life-long leader of the Muslim League, ‘to set up a labour union in the Adamjee Jute Mills’²⁷—the largest of the mills in East Pakistan having some 30,000 wage-labourers working those days.

The Awami League took its first initiative to draw industrial workers towards the party only after witnessing the enormous strength of the working class, on the one hand, and their support for the left political camps, on the other, which became evident during the mass uprising against the autocratic regime of General Ayub Khan in January 1969. Subsequently, the party started working among industrial workers and floated its labour front, East Pakistan Jatiya Sramik League, in October 1969 and, that too, in the face of a significant amount of resistance

from within the party. Sirajul Alam Khan, an influential leader of the radical section of the youths within the Awami League at the time who had taken the initiative to organise a labour front of the party, recalls the League's classed antipathy to the idea of politically organising the industrial workers. Khan says, "As it was leaked out to the Awami League leaders that a labour front of the party was in the offing, a section of the influential League leaders stood firmly against the initiative. They sent a representative, Obaidur Rahman (1940–2007), to Mujib bhai for persuading him to stop the process. He told Mujib bhai, in front of me, that the Awami League did not need any labour front and that almost all the League leaders were of the same opinion."²⁸ The Awami League leaders in question put up 'so much resistance' to the idea of launching a labour front of the party that the Sheikh, who had 'initially agreed to inaugurate the first council session of the labour body' abstained from attending the function'.²⁹ Thus the Awami League launched its labour front as late as October 1969 while its peasant front, Bangladesh Krishak League, came into existence in the post-independence Bangladesh in April 1972.

The Awami League's lack of interest in politically mobilising the industrial workers and rural peasants speaks a lot of the party's classed attitude towards the two poor classes of people in question. The phenomenon remains a clear historical testimony to the fact that it was due to the handy work of the Left that the poor classes of the people, particularly the industrial workers and the peasants, had played a decisive role in the struggles for East Pakistan's autonomy, which would eventually culminate in Bangladesh's successful war of national liberation.

Students also rise in the East Dawns the magnificent mass uprising

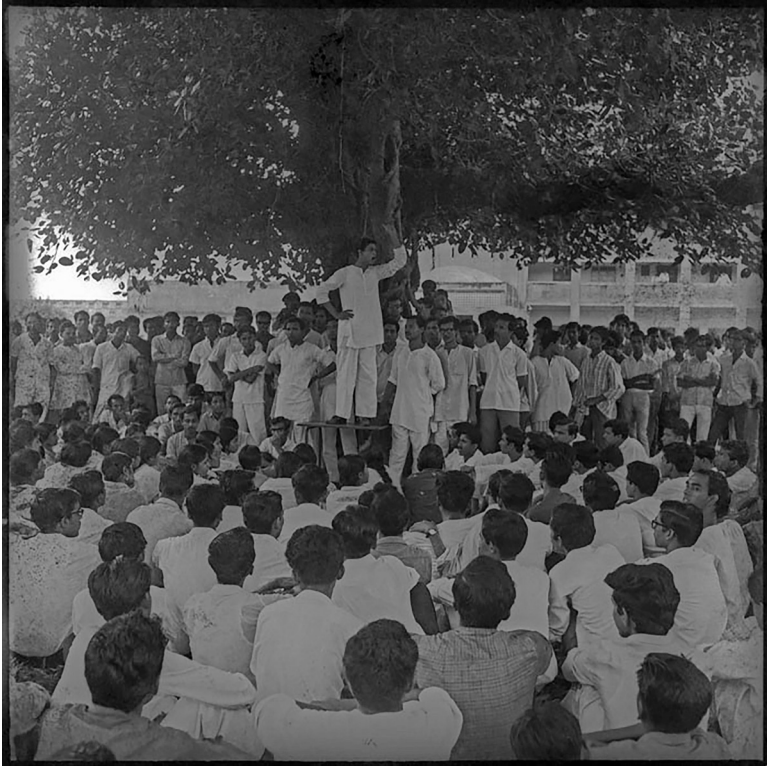
As Moulana Bhasani started his gherao movement, which began with laying siege to the Governor House in Dhaka on December 6, 1968, and the peasants were getting ready to lay sieges to government establishments across East Pakistan on January 8, a very significant political development took place in the East. Four student organisations, left and centrist, particularly the two factions of East Pakistan Student Union and the East Pakistan Student League, which had been trying to forge a greater unity against the autocratic regime of General Ayub Khan for a few weeks, eventually resolved to put up a united front based on a common programme, under the banner of the Students Action Committee (SAC).¹ Besides, the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU), led by Tofail Ahamed of the Students League and Nazim Kamran Chowdhury of the National Student Front, was a major component of the combined body.

The SAC of the East, which would soon create a great history of anti-autocracy student movement in the region, announced its 11-Point charter of demands—educational, political and economic—at a press conference in the Dhaka University premises on January 4, 1969. The historic programme accommodated the prime interests of all classes of people of East Pakistan those days. In formulating the programme, the Left student bodies accepted the Students League's demand for accommodating the Awami League's Six-point charter for a

regional autonomy—a set of demands that the Left camps used to find ‘quite inadequate’ for the emancipation of the people at large. The Student League, on the other hand, accommodated the Left’s anti-imperialist programmes, such as the scrapping of pro-American defence pact like the SEATO and the SENTO, the implementation of non-aligned foreign policy and some other demands for the economic emancipation of the peasants and workers that the former used to find ‘too radical’.² Rehman Sobhan, a left-leaning economist reputed for his articles on ‘two-economy’ those days, observes that the 11-Point charter of demands of the SAC was ‘expanded on’ the League’s Six-point programme while the new points ‘took into account the more radical concerns of the left movement [...] that commanded a strong presence within the student community’.³

Meanwhile, four days into the announcement of the SAC’s 11-Point charter of demands, eight opposition parties of heterogeneous political colour—Left, centrist and Right wing—formed an ideologically unprincipled alliance, the Democratic Action Committee (DAC)⁴, over a common Eight-Point agenda on January 8. The Eight-point demands of the DAC included the introduction of federal system and parliamentary democracy, general elections based on universal franchise, lifting of the state of emergency, restoration of civic rights, release of all political prisoners, particularly including Wali Khan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, et cetera.⁵ The DAC’s one of the prime objections to the Ayub-regime, as it had claimed when it launched the political alliance, was the regime’s ‘deliberate as well as continuous neglect of the Islamic way of life’.⁶ The ‘DAC leaders’, on the other hand, ‘refused to support the SAC’s 11-Point charter’.⁷

Analysing the reason for the formation of the DAC, Mohammad Farhad writes, “The right wing political parties and leaders aspired to oust the government of Ayub [Khan], for they used to dislike some of his foreign policy orientations, such as



An anti-autocracy student rally in progress under the famous banyan tree in the Dhaka University premises in January 1969. Photo: Unknown

the expansion of Pakistan's relations with socialist countries like the Soviet Union and China. Besides, the bourgeois political leaders in question sought certain amount of liberal democratic reforms that comes along parliamentary democracy and, at the same time, would pave their way to power."⁸

However, the DAC resolved to begin its movement for the 'restoration of democracy' by observing 'demand day' on January 17, with a public rally in front of the Baitul Mukarram mosque and a post-rally procession in the afternoon. The SAC, on the other hand, announced its movement for materialising its much radical programme for democracy in the morning of January 17 by way of holding a student rally in favour of its 11-Point programme in the Dhaka university premises. Absolutely reluctant to allow any opposition movement, the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan imposed a ban on assembly and processions in the Dhaka city for the day.

The DAC held its rally almost peacefully, but its post-rally procession came under severe police attacks while the political combine failed to announce any significant follow-up programme of protests against the police atrocities. The SAC's programme was rather politically eventful while its leadership behaved courageously, which would place them in a lead role of an ensuing mass uprising soon.

The radical sections of the SAC activists brought out a post-rally protest procession outside the campus in violation of both—government ban on assembly and processions, on the one hand, and the leadership instruction against the violation of the government ban, on the other.⁹ The students' procession came under police attacks in the vicinity of the university and subsequently the SAC called a student strike in the educational institutions of the city for the next day 'to protest against the police atrocities'.

The students of Dhaka University, while observing the strike on January 18, went out of the campus and engaged

in clashes with the police in the vicinity. The student leaders eventually took a militant procession to the city, defying the government ban, which came under severe police brutality. The students of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology actively joined the movement by way of taking a procession out of their campus, which was also exposed to police actions. Subsequently, the SAC called student strike and processions across the province for January 20 to protest against police brutality, which would take the movement to a greater scale, paving the way for a hitherto unprecedented mass uprising against a repressive regime on January 24. In response to the SAC's call, the student community across East Pakistan observed a successful strike in their respective institutions while the agitating students clashed with the police in some district towns.

Meanwhile, several thousand students, boys and girls, assembled on the Dhaka University campus, many of them with sticks in their hands, in the morning of January 20. The SAC brought out a huge procession ignoring the government ban on the assembly of more than five people in the city. The police fired shots at the procession that killed a leader of the leftwing Student Union, Asaduzzaman, a 25-year-old law student of Dhaka University. The martyr, hailing from Hatirdia of Narsingdi, had earlier earned a master degree in history while he was also involved with the peasant movements in his home district.

The news of Asad's martyrdom spread like a wild fire and thousands of people from different walks of life gathered in the premises of Dhaka Medical College Hospital where lay his body. Selina Hossain, a reputed Bengali litterateur writes that the martyrdom of Asaduzzaman was a 'milestone of the mass movement of 1969, for the incident qualitatively changed the nature of the political struggle and accelerated the ultimate victory of the movement'.¹⁰ Farhad observes, "Asad's death

sowed the seed of a huge mass uprising against the oppressive Ayub-Monem regime.”¹¹ Rano notes, “Asad’s martyrdom converted the flame of mass movement into the fire of mass uprising.”¹²

In order to protest against Asad’s murder, the SAC instantly called a general strike in the Dhaka city for January 21 and took up the programme of holding a *Gayebana Janaza* for Asad in the Paltan ground the same day, a mourning procession for January 22, a torch procession for January 23 and a day-long province-wide general strike for January 24 and a public rally at the Paltan ground that afternoon.

The government imposed ‘legal’ restrictions on political gathering and procession and deployed para-military East Pakistan Rifle to tackle the possible political situation in the Dhaka city on January 21. The city dwellers observed a complete strike. There was no car plying the street and no shop open, but thousands of people came to attend Asad’s *Janaza* at the Paltan ground. The leaders of different political parties of the opposition camps also attended the *Janaza*. The Dhaka-based newspapers reported the next day that after the *Janaza*, some one hundred thousand people—men and women, workers and employees, lawyers and artistes, politicians and businessmen—brought out a procession, defying government restrictions, in the Dhaka city with a ‘flag’, made of Asad’s blood-soaked shirt, ahead of the procession. The press also reported that it was the largest procession that the city had seen in its memorable past while its size was getting larger every moment as it was advancing further. The protesters clashed with the members of the Para-military force in some parts of the city while the latter fired shot at the protesters, triggering further anger among the people at large.

January 22 passed almost peacefully, with the students and other political activists bringing out a ‘silent procession’ for mourning the killing of Asaduzzaman across East Pakistan.



The students' anti-autocracy processions being joined in by the Dhaka city dwellers in January 1969 . Photo: Rashid Talukder

The torch procession was brought out in the evening of January 23, as if, to warm up for the next day, meant for observing a province-wide general strike to protest Asad's murder, which would create a history of hitherto unprecedented mass uprising against a repressive regime. In order to keep the memory of Asad's martyrdom, the SAC leaders renamed the Dhaka city's Ayub Gate after Asad's name, which would be officially recognised by the post-independence government of Bangladesh. The Asad Gate in the western part of the Dhaka city still reminds the passers-by of the martyrdom of an ideologically committed young man that triggered off a magnificent mass uprising against an autocratic regime.

However, the mass movement took a new turn during the general strike on January 24. Thousands of people from different social strata, particularly those belonging to the poor classes of the population, took to the city streets and engaged themselves in clashes with police and other law enforcement agencies of the government almost everywhere, braving tear-gas shells and shots of fire. Matiur Rahman, a 17-year old student of the city's Nabakumar Institute, and Rostam Ali, a 14-year-old boy, were shot dead by police in the morning in front of the government secretariat, which further enraged the protesting masses and they went on rampaging various government and ruling party establishments the whole day.

Notably, the martyrdoms of the youths during the marvelous mass uprising against autocracy had influenced a significant number of creative Bengali litterateurs to instantly compose a good number of poems, verses and lyrics glorifying the beauty of people's resistance, in general, and the sacrifices of the martyrs, in particular, which, in turn, vigorously influenced the process of popular democratic resistance while some of the verses concerned are still being remembered by many. For example, Shamsur Rahman's poem on the blood-soaked shirt of bullet-hit Asaduzzaman—*Asader Shirt*—is still being

recited by the rebellious youths whenever an occasion arises, the concluding lines of which, in ‘quick translation by Azfar Hussain, reads: “Just a piece of cloth standing for humanity/Has concealed our weakness, cowardice, debasement, and shame:/ Asad’s shirt morphs into the flag of our heart today.”¹³ Again, Rahman’s poem on a martyred body, *E lash amra rakhbo kothai*, reads: “Where should we bury this corpse?/Where is that grave worthy of it?/Be it earth or a range of mountain or the blue ocean/Everything too worthless, too small, to contain the martyred body.”¹⁴ Besides, Al Mahmud composed a couple of very powerful rhymes on the public resistance against autocracy and subsequent martyrdoms, particularly of Asad and Matiur, in the massive anti-autocracy movements, such as “Truck”, which were being recited by political activists every now and then in those days of the student-mass uprising. The rhymes, again, in Hussain’s translation, read: “Truck! Truck! Truck!/The pig-mouthed truck is trundling fast/Keep the doors shut/.Why should we close the windows?/Why should we bolt our doors?/Asad has gone out with a procession—/one that will return./Truck! Truck! Truck!/To set the truck’s mouth to fire/ Seek out Matiur!/But where would we find Matiur?/He’s asleep now and forever!/Then you are the ones, o adorables!/ Light up the fire!”¹⁵

The piece of a poem titled *Nishiddha Sampadakia*, composed by Helal Hafiz, in 1969 not only did inspire hundreds of youths to join the political movements 50 years ago, but also continues to influence the minds of the youths to participate in the processions against injustice even today. A verse of the poem says, *Ekhan Jauban jar/michile jabar tar shrestha shamay*, meaning, “Now, in your youth/Is the best time to join a procession.”

Mohammad Farhad recollects that ‘the masses rose in an uprising of an unprecedented proportion on January 24’. He writes: “Thousands of people including students,

factory workers, urban poor, lower-middle class employees, shopkeepers, traders et cetera took to the city streets with a politically militant attitude. The active participation of the working class people in the movement brought in qualitative changes in the nature of the political struggle. Many of them faced bullets shot by the government's para-military forces in the city streets, which, in turn, further infuriated the masses inspiring them to clash with the police, forcing the latter to retreat. [...] It was a mass uprising of unbelievable proportion. At least 50 thousand people were out to ransack the Dhaka city. The hitherto powerful civil bureaucrats went into hiding. The police administration collapsed. The angry mob set two government-controlled newspapers, the Morning News and the Dainik Pakistan, on fire. The protesters also set on fire the Arzoo Hotel owned by a prosecution witness in the Agartala Conspiracy Case and laid siege to many a residence of the ruling Muslim League leaders. The agitating masses also laid siege to the central secretariat and made attempts to set it ablaze. The mass movement reached its climax on January 24."¹⁶ M. Shamsuddoha, then general secretary of the pro-Moscow Students Union who was also a SAC leader, recalls that the major Dhaka-based newspapers reported the next day that the slogans that thousands of protesters chanted on January 24 included, 'Forget about Pakistan, liberate East Bengal'.¹⁷

Notably, the pro-Peking East Bengal Communist Party (EBCP), led by Deben Shikder and Abul Bashar, took up the programme of liberating East Bengal from Pakistan through armed revolution in 1968 while Deben Shikder was arrested in July 1969 on charge of 'making efforts to free East Pakistan' from Pakistan 'to create People's Democratic East Bengal' and a military tribunal punished him with 'one year of rigorous imprisonment' in January 1970.¹⁸ Besides, Siraj Shikder(1944–1975), who set up the Mao Research Centre in January 1968, resolved to liberate Bangladesh from



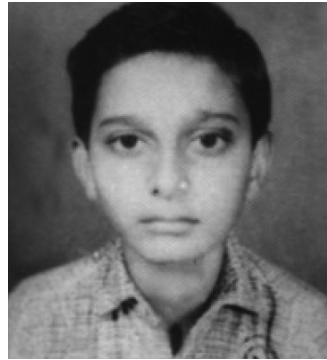
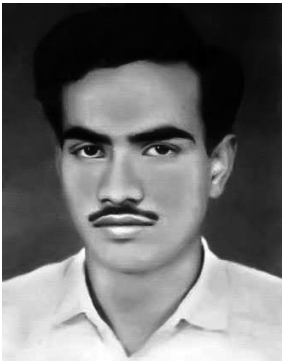
An anti-autocracy students' procession, joined in by ordinary people, in the Dhaka city in January 1969. The protesting poor child in front of the procession remains to be an iconic figure of the mass uprising of 1969. Photo: Rashid Talukder

Pakistan the same year and even made an attempt to develop a link with Karen rebels in Burma for waging an armed struggle for independence of Bangladesh.”¹⁹ The theory and praxis of the two leftwing parties for liberating Bangladesh from Pakistan through armed struggle had started capturing the political imagination of the young revolutionaries those days. The pro-Peking communist groups apart, a small ‘nucleolus’ of radically thinking leaders of the East Pakistan Student League led by Sirajul Alam Khan also started realizing the need of independence from Pakistan in the mid-1960s while a ‘shadow forum’ of a select group of Student League leaders was formed in 1968 to secretly propagate the idea of independence within the student body.²⁰

Be that as it may, recalling the events taking place on January 24, Rano writes: “A man who appeared most politically innocent only a month ago suddenly turned out to be a courageous fighter. Almost all the able bodied men of the Dhaka city came down on the streets. [...] Seven protesters were killed while the fearless people were marching through the streets with the bodies of the martyred on their shoulders. This is what is called people’s uprising. [...] It was the rein of the ordinary people. The administration had collapsed. The rich people were leaving the Dhaka city. The families of the top-level civil bureaucrats and the rich businessmen, particularly those of the non-Bengali ones, were waiting in the long queue at the Tejgaon airport, ready to fly for West Pakistan.”²¹

Biren Shome, a young Dhaka based painter at the time, recalls that ‘after the martyrdom of Asad and Matiur, the Dhaka city turned into an erupting volcano’. Shome reminisces, “The people of the city used to speak in the language of protest rallies and processions, banners and posters. To the popular anger against the dictatorial regime was added people’s determination to lay down lives [for the cause of the homeland].”²²

People in thousands poured in the Paltan ground where the



Asaduzzaman (left), a leading left wing student activist whose martyrdom during the anti-autocracy movement on January 20, 1969 sparked the mass uprising in East Pakistan on January 24, 1969. Photo: Unknown

Matiur Rahman (right), a school boy, who along with others, embraced martyrdom on January 24, 1969, expediting the fall of the Ayub regime. Photo: Unknown

SAC leaders were scheduled to address a post-strike public rally on January 24. The groups of protesters entered the venue with the bodies of the martyred on their shoulder while the rest got so agitated against the incumbents that they started demanding that the student leaders should lead processions towards the heavily guarded Governor House; some were for attacking the Dhaka cantonment—ideas, if accepted, the student leaders envisaged, would lead to fierce clashes with the military contingents deployed in and around the Governor House or the Cantonment to be resulting in an unprecedented bloodbath.

Most leaders found the ideas to be quite ‘adventurist’ and, therefore, abandoned the idea of holding the rally in the traditional style. They, rather, managed to bring in an *Imam* to pray for the martyred souls. Some contents of the ‘prayer’ that the *Imam* loudly said on the occasion was, however, of quite political nature. For example, the *Imam* appealed to God to ‘destroy the repressive regime’ and sought ‘extreme humiliation of the oppressors’ while the huge gathering of the angry protesters was echoing such appeals in a voice.²³ However, finally, as M. Shamsuddoha recollects, “The ocean of protesters turned into a huge mourning procession with religious fervour. Some of us started reciting a kalima—*La Ilaha Ilallah, Muhammadur Rasulallah*—that the whole congregation almost piously echoed in chorus and spontaneously followed us through the streets, with bodies of the two martyred students on the shoulders of some participants at the forefront and still chanting the kalmia, to the playground of the Allama Iqbal Hall, now Sergeant Zahurul Haq Hall, of Dhaka University.”²⁴

Then, the student leaders addressed the masses gathered at the playground, but no ‘follow-up programme’ came from the ‘hesitant’ leaders. Father of ‘Matiur’, martyred in the movement, also came there to tell the people that he had ‘no regret for the sacrifice of my son’s life while the fall of the repressive regime is inevitable’. Now, a section of the left-



Tofail Ahmed, Student League leader and Vice President of the Dhaka University Central Students' Union, addressing a huge public gathering after Asaduzzaman was killed in police firing on January 20, 1969. Asad's blood-soaked shirt, which became a great symbol of anti-autocracy protests, is being held high while the meeting was in progress. Photo : Rashid Talukder

wing activists was demanding next programme and the masses echoed the demand. Under the circumstance, ‘the student leaders were forced to call a general strike for January 25’.²⁵ However, the government called out Army in the Dhaka city and clamped curfew in the evening, with an order to ‘shoot at sight’ anyone breaking the curfew. People did break the curfew and three protesters—Anware Begum, a home maker, Abdul Latif, a student and Rahimdad, a private sector employee—were killed in police firing in the Dhaka city on the day.

Meanwhile, the news of mass uprising in the capital Dhaka and police brutality against the protesters created enormous reaction in district towns of the province. The students and the people at large brought out militant processions and fought pitched battles with the police and para-military forces across East Pakistan, braving bullets, teargas canisters and batons. The government imposed curfew in some district towns, particularly in Narayanganj and Khulna, to contain the militant mass movement, but failed to control the indomitable masses. The politically conscious and historically aware sections of the people of Bangladesh still observe the day, January 24, as the ‘Mass Uprising Day’ every year not only to remember the martyrs of anti-autocracy movement, but also gather ideological strength to fight for the democratic empowerment of the people at large.

Be that as it may, the huge mass uprising in East Pakistan created serious impact on the West. The students and the ordinary people took to the Karachi streets on January 26 and clashed with the police the whole day, resulting in the imposition of curfew in the evening. The next day, January 27, thousands of people took to the streets of Lahore in protest against the police oppression in the East. Mohammad Farhad writes, “More than a hundred thousand people joined a militant procession in Lahore and marched through the streets defying the army troops who stood in the way with military vehicles fitted with

machine guns. In the face of people's resistance, the military troops retreated. The agitating students and workers set a pro-government newspaper, Kohistan, on fire. Subsequently, the government imposed curfew in the Lahore city in the evening and called out the Army to enforce the curfew provisions."²⁶ But no amount of repressive steps of the government succeeded to calm down the protesting masses. One demonstrator was killed in Karachi and hundreds were injured in clashes with the Army and police on January 28. The government called out the Army in Gujranwala on January 29 and three were killed in military firing there on the day. The repressive measures against the opposition activists only increased the people's anger and thus strengthened the anti-Ayub movement in the big cities of West Pakistan.

Under such a heated political circumstance, the leaders of the politically conservative Democratic Action Committee started fearing revolutionary changes in society and, therefore, refrained from announcing any significant programme that would intensify the people's political struggle further. Some of the DAC components rather started looking for opportunities to de-radicalise the mass upsurge by way of forging a mutually beneficial negotiation with the repressive regime of General Ayub Khan.

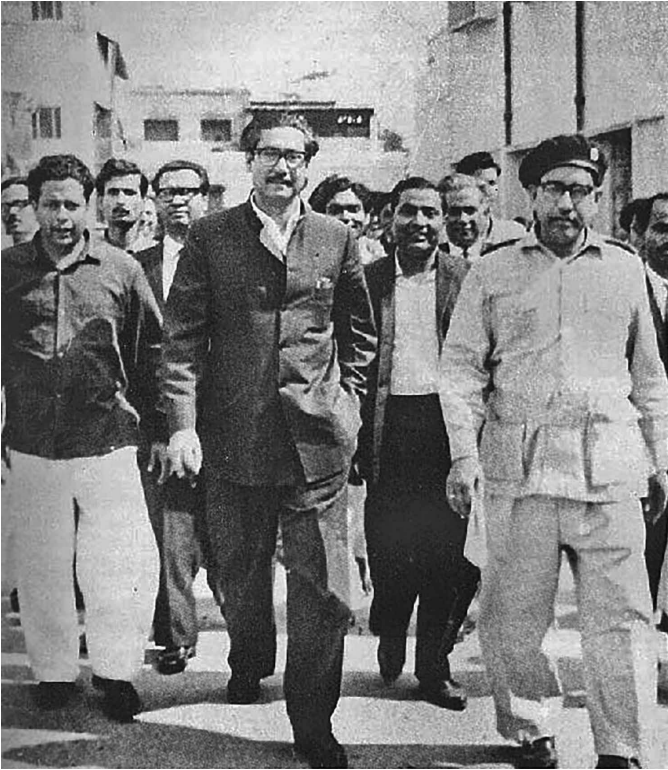
This was the time when Holiday editorially said in the last week of January 1969: "While the inhibited and hesitant DAC leadership looked on, the leadership of a radical socialist movement passed from their hands on to the determined students, industrial workers and the lower middle class. And so began the story of a new movement that inspired at least a million people to fuse into a revolutionary mass of people, chanting anti-establishment, anti-feudal, anti-monopoly and anti-imperialist slogans."²⁷ The weekly also observed that the 'political parties must come out of their shell and act now or never' and alerted the radical forces of the democratic

movement at the same time that ‘some of the partners of DAC are keenly looking for an opportunity to start a dialogue with Establishment’, who have already ‘cautioned the people’ against ‘ultra-revolutionary and adventuristic slogans’.²⁸

Moulana Bhasani, however, was addressing a series of public meetings in East Pakistan, relentlessly advocating for taking the mass movement to a greater depth those days. Rano recollects, “The Moulana was spitting fire: siege and burn. In fact, it was burning everywhere. [...] Slogans like *Keu khabe ar keu khabe na; ta hobe na, ta hobe na*, meaning, ‘it is unacceptable that some would dine lavishly while the others would go hungry’, became the rallying cry of the people. [...] It was truly a festival of the exploited masses.”²⁹ This was the time when the factory workers set up their action committees in different industrial zones in and around the Dhaka city. “Besides”, Farhad writes, “some 80 Action Committees came into existence in different areas of the city. The women also started getting organised under their own action committees.”³⁰

In the face of the mass uprising in East Pakistan and the people’s movement in the West, General Ayub Khan softened his hitherto tough stance of facing the opposition with an iron hand and announced on February 1 that he would soon have talks with the opposition leaders. The Students’ Action Committee opposed the offer, saying that there could be ‘no dialogue with opposition, when many an opposition leader has been languishing in prisons’. The student leaders rather issued a joint statement the same day, calling upon all concerned to ‘spread people’s uprising across the rural areas’.³¹

Meanwhile, President Ayub Khan, who came to Dhaka on February 6, told journalists the next day that his government was considering the withdrawal of the Emergency and withholding the application of the so-called National Security Regulations. But such promises failed to impress on the agitating opposition forces. Two students of Rajargaon—Majibur Rahman and Kamal Uddin



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is being taken to the Special Tribunal, set up for trying the accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case inside the Dhaka Cantonment, from the Dhaka Central Jail in January 1969. Photo: Unknown

Akand—were killed while clashing with the police the same day.

Political agitations continued unabated, with more and more sections of the people taking to the streets every day. While the female political and cultural activists started participating in the protest rallies and processions, side by side men, in Dhaka as well as other district towns since January, several thousand women brought out a well-organised protest procession of their own in the Dhaka city on February 7.³²

The SAC observed ‘oath taking day’ across East Pakistan on February 9—the ‘oath’ being that they would continue to fight until the 11-Point demands were met. The students observed the day by organising rallies and bringing out processions in every town of the province while similar programmes were observed in many a rural area. Meanwhile, as part of the programme, the central Student Action Committee held a huge student-public rally on the day at the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city, which was attended by, as SAC leader Tofail Ahmed (b. 1943) reminisces in February 2017, ‘hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life’. He writes: “The student-public rally turned into an ocean of people. Factory workers, peasants, boatmen, fishermen, smiths, office clerks, middle class city-dwellers and intellectuals—all came to attend the rally in processions, chanting slogans against the oppressive regime and demanding release of the political prisoners. The ‘oath-taking’ gathering overflowed the historic Paltan ground, forcing thousands to somehow manage a place to stand at the balconies of the adjacent two-story stadium. It was, indeed, an overwhelming experience.”³³ The student leaders and those attending the rally, took oath to ‘continue the united movement of the ‘students, workers and other sections of the people’ until the ouster of General Ayub’s government, the ‘scrapping of the Constitution adopted by the regime, election to a new constituent assembly based on universal franchise and the adoption of a new Constitution incorporating into it the political

spirit of the 11-Point charter of demands’.

However, once the public meeting was over, thousands of people marched through the streets of the city in dozens of processions and, finally, assembled in front of the Dhaka central jail demanding an ‘immediate release of the political prisoners’. The protesters even broke a gate of the prison and entered the jailor’s residence. Mohammad Farhad writes that ‘it took enormous efforts of the student leaders outside the gate and political prisoners inside to bring the situation under control’. Under such a boiling circumstance, the government announced the release of as many as 141 political prisoners, detained under the repressive National Security Regulations, the same evening while other political, labour and student leaders continued to be released in the next few days.

The situation in West Pakistan was also boiling. Altaf Gauhar recalls: “Lahore was paralysed by processions and strikes which were drawing support from every student organisation and educational institution in the city. The National Students’ Federation in Karachi decided to launch a civil disobedience movement from 15 February if political leaders including Bhutto were not released.”³⁴ Subsequently, the government released NAP leader Wali Khan and PPP leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on February 14—a day before the deadline was to be over.

Meanwhile, the DAC observed its lone general strike in both wings of Pakistan on February 14, which was actively supported by the student community, particularly of East Pakistan.

Sheikh's secret message to the Moulana Moulana's roaring response to free the Sheikh

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made a historically significant political move from inside the prison on February 14, 1969, which would continue to influence the country's political process for long: he secretly sent a personal message to Moulana Bhasani, requesting the latter to launch a decisive movement for getting him released from the prison.

The Sheikh, the principal accused in the Agratala Conspiracy Case, had been behind bar since May 9, 1968 on charge of 'conspiring for the separation of East Pakistan from Pakistan with Indian help'. The trial of the case began in a special tribunal inside the Dhaka cantonment on June 19, 1968.

The Sheikh resolved to communicate with the Moulana when, as a reputed biographer of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, S. A. Karim, notes, 'the proceedings [of the Conspiracy Case] dragged on month after month' contributing to 'mounting dissatisfaction outside courtroom among the general public', but no decisive political movement for his release was in sight. Even, allegation has it, as Dr. Taj Hasmi, who was a leading political activist at the Dhaka University those days, recalls, the top leaders of the Students League were initially reluctant to wage a movement 'demanding the withdrawal of the Agratala Conspiracy Case and the release of the 35 detainees, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' on the plea that it was 'an anti-state conspiracy case'.¹ However, S. A. Karim writes, "The Awami League was considerably weakened by the arrests of its top



Moulana Bhasani, along with other political leaders, attending the namaz-e-janaza of Seargent Zahurul Haq, an accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, killed in the military custody, in the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city on February 16, 1969. Photo : Naib Uddin Ahmed

leaders and activists. Syed Nazrul Islam was the titular leader now but he was not a rabble-rouser. At this juncture there was only one politician who had the prestige and proven ability to lead a mass upsurge; Maulana Bhasani.

Mujib had the genial idea of establishing contact with him and appeal to him to take the lead. It was done surreptitiously through a journalist covering the trial.”²

The Sheikh told Ataus Samad (1937–2012), a famous reporter of the Dhaka-based Pakistan Observer of the time covering the proceedings of the Agartala Conspiracy Case, on February 14 to send a request to the Moulana to ‘wage a movement for my freedom’, because ‘he will need me to do politics in this country and I will also need him for the same purpose’.³ Back to the newspaper office, Ataus Samad privately shared the information with A B M Musa, the News Editor of the Observer, and on the latter’s advice, the former took Sirajul Hossain Khan (1926- 2007), a journalist associated with the Moulana’s National Awami Party, along with him to communicate the Sheikh’s momentous message to the Moulana in the evening.

The message was not lost on the Moulana.

Recollecting the Moulana’s response to the Sheikh’s message, A B M Musa later writes: “When the message was communicated, an excited Moulana asked, ‘Mujibar said this? All right, I must get him free’.”⁴ Faiz Ahmod (1928–2012), another reputed journalist working for the Dhaka-based Dainik Azad who had also been covering the court proceedings of the conspiracy case along with Ataus Samad, writes, “The Moulana instantly asked Sirajul Hossain Khan to issue a press statement to the effect that he would hold a public rally at the Paltan ground of the city on February 16.”⁵ The Sheikh’s message to the Moulana brought together the two top politicians, unofficially though, after they had bitterly separated from each other during the Awami League’s Kagmari conference in 1957. The renewed contact between the Moulana and the Sheikh in February 1969 would not only decisively contribute to the exoneration of the latter from the ‘sedition’ charge brought against him in the Agratala Conspiracy Case and, thus,

save his life from a possible death penalty, but also influence the next course of East Bengal's history in more significant ways than one, leading to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in December 1971.

Meanwhile, the next day, February 15, Sergeant Zahurul Haq (1935– 1969), one of the 34 accused in the Agartala conspiracy case, was killed in the military custody inside the cantonment. The military authorities claimed that Sergeant Haq was shot at while he was trying to flee the prison cell and then he succumbed to bullet injury—a concocted story that the people of East Pakistan rejected instantly. The people rather took it for a 'cold-blooded murder' of a Bengali patriot by the Ayub regime and, therefore, took to the streets in thousands, chanting slogans for the withdrawal of the conspiracy case, an unconditional release of all the accused in the case and ouster of the Ayub regime. In clashes between the protesting masses and the law enforcement agencies, a student, Mazhar Ahmed, was killed in police firing in the Nabinagar areas of Narayanganj. However, Altaf Gauhar suspects that the murder of Sergeant Zahurul Haq in the military custody was 'staged by Yahya's intelligence chief in Dacca to frustrate' Ayub's move to hold a dialogue with politicians to end the political crisis⁶ and, thus, pave Yahya's way for taking over of power, which he eventually would on March 25, 1969.

However, as Sergeant Zahurul Haq's body was released the next day, February 16, Moulana Bhasani's scheduled Paltan rally in the afternoon, which was originally designed to mount pressure on the government to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other accused in the Conspiracy Case, turned primarily to be one to protest against the custodial murder of Sergeant Haq. Nevertheless, while addressing a huge political rally, the Moulana not only 'publicly advocated violent means vis-à-vis peaceful ones' to get all the legitimate demands of the people met, but also 'threatened Auyb Khan that he would get Sheikh Mujibur Rahman freed by breaking open the jail'⁷, if the Sheikh was not released soon. In case of a failure to release the Sheikh, the Moulana also threatened the government with a public call to 'stop paying taxes'.⁸ A B M Musa writes, "In front of some hundred thousand people at

the Paltan ground, the Moulana uttered his famous *Khamosh*—shut up—[towards General Ayub Khan], [...] and a new slogan—*Jeler Tala Bhangbo, Sheikh Mujibke Anbo*—We will get Sheikh Mujib freed by breaking open the gate of prison—was incorporated into the student-mass movement of the day. Thus began the Moulana’s famous or infamous violent movement [...], which would result in the release of Bhasani’s Mujibar.”⁹

As the protest rally was over, thousands of people from different strata of the society, including hundreds of factory workers from the industrial zones adjacent to the Dhaka city, brought out a huge funeral procession. Even Altaf Gauhar admits: “Over a million people joined the funeral procession of Sergeant Zahurul Haq. [...] A section of the crowd turned violent and burnt several government offices and houses of ministers, including Khawaja Shahabuddin’s house. Bhashani gave a new slogan to the mob—‘gherao jalao’ (besiege and burn). In utter frustration Ayub said, ‘this man suffers from every kind of disease but he doesn’t die’.”¹⁰

The East’s rebellious student community, joined in by protesting masses, continued to unleash their anger against Ayub’s autocratic regime by setting ablaze the official residences of a couple of ministers on Abdul Gani Road. Besides, the residence of the presiding judge of the Agartala Conspiracy Case, Justice S. A. Rahman, was also set on fire. Faiz Ahmod writes, “Justice Rahman narrowly saved his life by escaping his residence through a backdoor, as did [King] Laksman Sen [in 1203 AD], with the help of a cook. The rebellious people, in fact, wanted to avenge the murder of Zahur[ul Haq] by destroying the building used as the residence of the tribunal chief, for the red building became a symbol of the dictatorial Ayub regime. And the fire of the mass rebellion eventually burnt down the building to ashes.”¹¹ Justice Rahman would leave Dhaka, ‘closing the proceedings of the tribunal’ trying the Agartala Conspiracy Case, the next day, on February 17, 1969.¹² Meanwhile, during the daylong clashes with the law enforcers on February 16, at least one protester was killed in police firing and many were injured with bullets, which



A procession of female students of Dhaka University demanding an end to military rule in February 1969. Photo: Unknown

only added fuel to the fire of protests. The students of Dhaka University's Allama Iqbal Hall, renamed the hall after Sergeant Zahurul Haq in the same evening¹³, which would be officially endorsed by the university authorities concerned after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

In the face of such an irresistible movement, the government lifted, by an announcement made in the evening of February 16, the state of Emergency imposed some six months ago, with an immediate effect, although the authorities continued to slap curfew in the evenings. However, blazing with anger, the people refused to accept the curfew any more. Altaf Gauhar recalls: "The situation in Dacca was now completely out of control. Curfew was being openly violated and people were demanding the withdrawal of the army."¹⁴

The political developments in Dhaka appear to have critically shaken General Ayub while he held Moulana Bhasani responsible for the unprecedented agitation. The General noted in his diary the same evening: "News from Dacca is depressing. Bhashani held a meeting, ostensibly for holding funeral prayers of an Agartala conspirator prisoner killed when attempting to escape. He then encouraged the students to indulge in large-scale arson, several houses belonging to ministers and the government have been burnt. Apparently, Bhasani pointed out the places himself. The governor rang up to say that he has enough evidence to arrest Bhasani. Justice Rahman, who was president of the Agartala tribunal, escaped by a hair's breadth. Manzur Qadir, too, was chased."¹⁵

Under such boiling political circumstances, a hapless government of General Ayub Khan resolved to officially invite also the politicians outside the DAC to the proposed Roundtable conference, particularly because the DAC leaders 'did not want Bhutto and Bhasani sniping at them from outside the conference'. The government, therefore, postponed the conference for a few days and issued separate invitations to Moulana Bhasani and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was released from prison on February 15, although both of them had already rejected the idea of holding talks with a falling autocratic regime. Besides, the government

invited Air Marshal Asgahr Khan (1921-2018) and General Azam Khan (1908-1994) of West Pakistan and Justice S M Murshid (1911-1979) of the East.

Sheikh's unconditional release

Meanwhile, both President Ayub Khan and DAC coordinator Nawabjada Nasrullah Khan(1916-2003) realised the political importance of the Awami League's effective participation in the roundtable. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman also informed Nasrullah Khan, who was visiting Dhaka in the second week of February, through Barrister Amir-ul Islam, a lawyer of the Sheikh in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, that the proposed roundtable could not be politically fruitful with the League's participation when both of its president and general secretary were behind bars. Nasrullah Khan found the proposition logical and said that a League representative could raise the issue at the 'preparatory committee' formed to successfully hold the roundtable while the Sheikh found Tajuddin Ahmad, the League's general secretary detained under Public Safety Rules, to be the right person to properly argue for the issue at the preparatory committee'. Sharmin Ahmad, daughter of Tajuddin Ahmad, writes that informed of the Sheikh's view on February 12, again through Barrister Islam, Nasrullah Khan 'made a few phone calls here and there' and 'then asked' the barrister 'to meet Mr. Tajuddin at his residence after an hour'.¹⁶ Tajuddin Ahmad was freed immediately, right on February 12, and he left for Rawalpindi on February 18.

The government was now ready to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman 'on parole' to attend the roundtable.

Bhasani and Bhutto 'declined the invitation leaving DAC', as Altaf Gauhar observes 'to stew in its own juice'. The Sheikh initially 'agreed to the government proposal and, therefore, asked one of his lawyers, Barrister Amir-ul Islam, on February 17 to submit a prayer to the special tribunal concerned for his 'release on parole' in a 'specially convened session in the evening'.¹⁷ But a

section of the Awami League leaders, such as Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed (1918–1996), Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury (1928–2006) and important sympathisers of the party, such as senior editors like Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah and Zahur Hossain Chowdhury (1922–1980), opposed the idea of the Sheikh’s accepting release on parole¹⁸ they correctly analysed that a political situation had arisen out of people’s movement when the government would have no option but to release him unconditionally. Moulana Bhasani, after all, as Selina Hossain writes, ‘had already roared at Paltan ground against any condition attached to Sheikh Mujib’s release. The Moulana demanded, “Sheikh Mujib has to be set free unconditionally and the Agartala Conspiracy Case has to be withdrawn. In case of a failure, the protesting people of [East] Bengal would burn the tribunal, which is holding a farcical theatre of trial, into ashes.”’¹⁹

The radical sections of the Student League leadership was also opposed to the idea of the Sheikh’s release on parole, for they had also correctly assessed that the Ayub regime would soon be forced, in the face of irresistible political resistance, to withdraw the Conspiracy case and release all the political prisoners, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, unconditionally. Even The Sheikh’s family, particularly his wife Begum Fazilatunnesa and eldest son Sheikh Kamaluddin, was also against the idea of his release on parole.²⁰ Some former leaders of the Student League who were very active in politics those days, especially Sirajul Alam Khan and Abdur Razzak, earlier vigorously pursued Begum Fazilatunnesa to dissuade the Sheikh from accepting the release on parole.

Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury writes, “Begum Fazilatunnesa, the competent wife of Sheikh Mujib, saw her husband inside the cantonment and dissuaded him against the release on parole, saying that it would be a betrayal with the people of [East] Bengal on your part to attend the roundtable on parole.”²¹

The Sheikh, in the face of opposition from Moulana Bhasani, his own important party colleagues, political sympathisers, student leaders and family members, eventually changed his mind to go free on parole. Santosh Gupta (1925–2009), a leftwing Bengali



An anti-autocracy procession of students demanding the withdrawal of the Agartala Conspiracy Case in the Dhaka city in February 1969.
Photo: Unknown

journalist, rightly sums up: “Sheikh Mujib eventually rejected the idea of getting released on parole in the face of Moulana Bhasani’s strong opposition to conditional freedom, the Student League’s demand for his unconditional release and Begum Mujib’s determined stance against the parole.”²²

The next day, February 18, while the students of Rajshahi University were engaged in clashes with the law enforcement agencies defying ban on processions in the morning, Professor Dr. Shamsuzzoha, proctor of the university, was killed right on the campus by an officer of [West] Pakistan Army who was posted in the vicinity of the university to contain the agitating students. Santosh Gupta asserts that ‘a [West] Pakistani military officer first shot at Dr. Shamsuzzoha and then his soldiers bayoneted the bullet-wound professor to death’.²³ Dr. Zoha’s martyrdom fuelled the movement further and hundreds of people joined the militant protest processions of the students in the divisional town of Rajshahi. In the afternoon, the government imposed curfew in the town *sine die*, but the protesters did hardly heed the government order. During clashes with law enforcement agencies, a student of Rajshahi City College, Nurul Islam Khoka, was killed by the police.

Meanwhile, as soon as the news of Professor Shamsuzzoha’s murder reached Dhaka, thousands of students and ordinary people took to the streets of the city, which had already been under curfew, and engaged in clashes with the law enforcement agencies for hours that resulted in the killing of at least one protester, injuring hundreds. The Curfew hours was extended for a longer period. But no amount of repressive measures could stop the rebellious population, students and the poor classes of people, in particular, the urban and the rural alike, from protesting against autocratic governance and discriminations. Besides, in order to protest against Professor Shamsuzzoha’s murder, the entire teacher community resolved to go on a province-wide strike *sine die* from February 20.

That the ordinary people, and that too without any political affiliation, can rise to rebellion against an autocratic political regime in the right circumstances became evident when, in the



A group of anti-autocracy protesters demanding the release of Moni Singh, leader of the Communist Party, in front of the Dhaka Central Jail in February 1969. Photo: Unknown

evening of February 18, several thousand people took to the streets, braving curfew and police firing, to demand ouster of the government of General Ayub Khan. Rano, who ‘checked with all the organisations involved in leading the mass movement of the time’, writes that ‘no political party or group, nor the Student Action Committee, had been aware of the procession before it was brought out amidst curfew’. He then discovers: “The curfew had been in force since February 16. The poor workers stranded in the city slums had no earning to survive. Moreover, there was scarcity of drinking water. Under the circumstance, they resolved on their own to take to the streets in defiance of the curfew. Thus began the procession. While advancing through the city streets, they urged the people living in the houses on both sides of the roads to join their protests. Those living in the roadside buildings belonged to the middle class of the population. Many of them responded to the call while some of them took along their [licensed] guns. The procession gradually swelled up to a huge one with some ten thousand participants. The police and para-military forces guarding the streets opened fire on the protest procession. Some protesters shot back once or twice. [...] Eventually, the law enforcers, under a government decision, stopped firing to let the procession pass and disperse naturally. Before dispersing, the protesters marched through different roads of the city.”²⁴ The same evening Moulana Bhasani issued a press statement demanding that the ‘curfew be lifted tonight’ and threatened the government saying, “If the authorities fail to lift curfew tonight, I will also defy it.”²⁵

The government had no option but to comply.

The pervasive protests continued in different parts of the East, including the Dhaka city, on February 19 in the midst of police brutality resulting in deaths and injuries of many protesters. The active involvement of the masses in the anti-autocracy movement becomes clear in the professional identities of those killed in police firing on the day: two industrial workers, Lokman Hossain and Mujibur Rahman, a restaurant worker, Shamsuddin, an icecream vendor, Abdul Alim and a carpenter, Abul Hashem, in the Dhaka city while,



Mahbub Ullah, general secretary of the Students Union and a central leader of the Students Action Committee, addressing the historic student-mass rally in the Dhaka Racecourse ground, where Tofail Ahmed proposed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to be accorded the appellation of Bangabandhu—Friend of Bengal—that people approved with thunderous cheers on February 23, 1969. Source: Tariq Ali's book—*Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*.

two industrial workers—Hafizur Rahman and Abdur Rahman, two students, Abul Kalam and Shamsul Haq, in Senbagh areas of Noakhali district.

Meanwhile, at a hurriedly called ‘emergency cabinet meeting’ the same day, most ministers, as well as President Ayub Khan, observed that under the prevalent political circumstances ‘there was no remedy except martial law’.²⁶ Later, in the evening, Ayub Khan had an exclusive talk with three Commanders-in-Chief and the Law Minister to work out necessary steps towards the promulgation of Martial Law. Following discussions, it was decided that the President should meet the opposition leaders before promulgation of the Martial Law and that the Governors of the two wings of Pakistan, Monem Khan in the East and General Musa Khan (1908-1991) in the West, should be replaced immediately.²⁷ More importantly, General Yahya suggested in the meeting that President Ayub Khan had to ‘step aside’, if not ‘step down’, to enable the army to ‘do the job of sorting out the politicians and putting down the agitation’.²⁸ Understandably, General Yahya and his men had already developed political ambition to ‘step in’.

In the midst of all this, came February 21, *Shaheed Dibas*, the day of the martyrdom for the mother language, the anniversary of an extraordinary political event in which the Bengali youths had embraced martyrdom in 1952 to secure the legitimate political status of Bangla, which was being denied by the Urdu-speaking ruling coterie of West Pakistan—an event that still remained a great source of inspiration for thousands to fight for realising the democratic rights of the people. The student community, which had played the pioneering role in February 1952, took the responsibility of managing the celebrations of the glorious language movement anniversary across East Pakistan, this time to realise its 11-Point programme and a set of democratic rights that particularly included regional autonomy and general elections based on universal franchise.

People from all strata were also ready this time to celebrate the historical event with extraordinary political vigour. For example,



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressing the historic student-mass rally, organised by the central Students Action Committee, on February 23, 1969, where he was accorded the appellation of 'Bangabandhu'—Friend of Bengal. Photo: Unknown

the painters of the East took up an extraordinary programme. Biren Shome rightly recalls: “The painters this year did not keep their responsibility limited to the painting of the *Shaheed Minar* premises with floral designs; they rather arranged for an exhibition of paintings on big canvases, 10 to 12 feet, depicting the exploitations of the masses and repression of the protesters by the autocratic regimes, on the one hand, and carrying the message of secular democratic values and humanity, on the other. [...] Besides, huge banners sporting [Bangla] vowels were also exhibited in the vicinity of the martyr’s monument that imbued the protesters with fresh fighting spirit.”²⁹

President Ayub, who was aware of the inherent political vigour of the East’s *Shaheed Dibas* those days, ‘was anxious to defuse’ the political impasse ‘before that date’.³⁰ But he failed.

The SAC drew up elaborate programmes to observe *Shaheed Dibas* with great political fervour and cultural solemnity, which included a huge ‘torch procession’ in the evening of February 20 defying the routine ‘evening curfew’, placing floral wreaths at the altar of central *Shaheed Minar* in Dhaka at the dawn of February 21, a public rally at the Paltan ground of the city in the afternoon and a cultural programme at the same venue in the evening. Similar programmes were undertaken across the province. Under the circumstance, the military authorities resolved to dissuade the SAC from bringing out ‘torch procession’ in the city and, therefore, contact Tofail Ahmed, the SAC’s convener, through some Bengali civilians, to have a meeting with the student leaders concerned. By then, side by side the mass-uprising hero Moulana Bhasani, Tofail Ahmed became an iconic figure of the massive student revolts while his room at the erstwhile Allama Iqbal Hall, now Sergeant Jahurul Huq Hall, of Dhaka University became the headquarters of the historic 11-Point student movement. Tofail Ahmed recollects that two civil servants—A Z M Obaidullah Khan and M K Anwar—and two intellectuals—[Abdul] Gaffar Chowdhury and Borhan Uddin Khan Jahangir—came to his room in the Iqbal Hall, on behalf of Major-General Mozaffar Ahmed, Pakistan Army’s General Officer Commanding in East

Pakistan, to invite the SAC leaders to 'an emergency official meeting' on February 20 at the secretariat of the provincial government.³¹ Eventually, Tofail Ahmed, along with Abdur Rauf, president of the Student League, and M Shamsuddoha, general secretary of the Pro-Moscow faction of the Student Union, met the government authorities, but refused to entertain the military request to withdraw the already announced programme of torch procession for the evening. The student leaders in question rather placed a counter-proposal that the government withdrew the evening curfew, assuring the authorities that the torch procession would not contribute to the deterioration of the law and order in the evening. In the face of the SAC's unbending determination to bring out the 'torch procession' and the 'assurance' given to the authorities, the government retreated from its original stance by way of lifting curfew for the February 20 evening.³²

While a huge 'torch procession', primarily of the students, marched through the main thoroughfares of the Dhaka city in the February 20 evening, thousands of students and a cross-section of people from across the city came to the central *Shaheed Minar* to pay homage to the language movement martyrs at the dawn of February 21. Then, the SAC held a huge public rally at the Paltan ground in the afternoon, which was 'attended by some half a million people'. The now-defunct *Dainik Pakistan* newspaper reported on February 22, 1969 that the 'public rally held in observance of *Shaheed Dibas* eventually turned to be a huge ocean of the masses while people from different sections of the society including industrial workers, peasants and even boatmen came from distant places to attend the Paltan rally'.³³

However, while addressing the public rally, the SAC leaders called upon the Members of National Assembly (MNAs), the Members of Provincial Assemblies (MPAs) and the Basic Democrats (BDs), 'elected' under a so-called Constitution introduced forcibly by the Ayub's martial law regime in 1962, to resign their positions by March 3, 1969.³⁴

The protesting students and the masses outside the Dhaka city observed the *Shaheed Dibas* in similar manner while in

some areas of the province, particularly in Barisal and Khulna, they clashed with the members of law enforcement agencies who opened fire on the protesting masses, resulting in the death of nine protesters. Subsequently, agitated protesters set the Khulna residence of Abdus Sabur Khan, a ruling Muslim League leader and Communication Minister of Ayub's Cabinet, on fire.³⁵

In the midst of such pervasive agitation in both the wings of Pakistan, President Ayub Khan realised that his days were now numbered, and in order to contain the political impasse, he announced in the evening of February 21, and that too swearing on God, that he would 'not be a candidate in the next election'—a decision, taken 'in the light of my faith' in 'God Almighty', which 'is final and irrevocable' and then hoped that '[a]ll doubts, suspicions and misgivings must end with this announcement'.³⁶

Then, the next day, on February 22, the Agartala Conspiracy Case was withdrawn and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the prime accused in the case, and all his co-accused were released. The Sheikh, who was arrested on May 9, 1968 on charge of sedition, reached his residence in the afternoon of February 22, 1969. Informed about the Sheikh's release, thousands of people came out to the streets in Dhaka, and beyond, to celebrate the victory of their struggles.

The West Pakistani ruling coterie implicated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the conspiracy case with a view to tarnishing his image, even banishing him from the political scene of Pakistan; but the attempt proved to be counter-productive on part of the Islamabad-based establishments, for the case in fact martyred the Sheikh and, therefore, he came out of the prison as the political hero of the East. Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, the joint secretary of the Awami League at the time, later observed quite rightly: "The Agartala Conspiracy Case rather popularised Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It made him the national hero."³⁷

Meanwhile, despite his return to the family after so many months, and that too under uncertain circumstances, a physically tired Sheikh paid a courtesy visit to Moulana Bhasani the same evening. The hasty visit was primarily a result of the Sheikh's sense of personal gratitude towards the Moulana for, contrary to partisan

propaganda of the later days, it was the Moulana who took the first meaningful initiative to save the Sheikh from the seditious charges framed in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, particularly following the latter's secret message to the former to launch a decisive movement for his release. Besides, the Sheikh discussed about the ensuing roundtable conference of the opposition leaders with Ayub Khan that he was to attend in Rawalpindi.

Given the context, the Sheikh's visit to the Moulana the day he was released was not very surprising, although it 'surprised' some of the latter's close associates. Rano, a left-wing labour leader at the time who 'witnessed' the meeting of the two leaders on February 22, recalls the event in the following words: "Sheikh Mujib[ur Rahman] suddenly entered NAP leader Saidul Hassan's house in the evening. Moulana Bhasani was staying there. Along with some other NAP leaders, I was also there. The Sheikh went to see the Moulana. We were surprised. After briefly exchanging some pleasantries with others, he straight entered the room that the Moulana was staying in and paid respect to the Moulana by touching his feet. Then he closed the door behind him and had an exclusive talk with Moulana Bhasani for some 20 minutes. He then came out very cheerful and left the house in a few minutes."³⁸

Behind the closed door, the Sheikh urged the Moulana 'to attend the [Roundtable] conference', writes Tariq Ali, who had extensive interviews of both the leaders on Pakistan's major political events of the time. Tariq Ali writes further: "The Moulana's instincts warned him against attending, and he replied that when his son was going, what need was there for the father to attend as well."³⁹

Be that as it may, in the face of the movement, the Ayub regime was forced to release many other opposition leaders on February 22, particularly those belonging to the left political camps who had been behind bars under the so-called National Security Regulations for months and years. Mani Singh, a leader of the pro-Moscow Communist Party and Nagen Sarker, a leader of the pro-Peking Communist Party, were the famous ones among those released on the same day while the others of the Left started being released in groups.

Meanwhile, the Students Action Committee accorded a rousing

‘public reception’ to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Racecourse ground the next day. There was, however, a little tension among the SAC leaders over the reception the night before, for the leaders of the Student League asserted that the Sheikh would alone be given the reception while leaders of other student bodies in the SAC wanted to include other major politicians released from prisons for the reception. The Student League objected to according reception to communist leader Mani Singh.⁴⁰ The other student bodies eventually agreed to the Student League proposal on condition that the SAC would accord a public reception to other released leaders, along with those accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, at the Paltan ground on February 25.

The Racecourse reception for the Sheikh on February 23 earned a special historical importance, for it was this reception in which Tofail Ahmed, then Student League leader and Vice-President of the Dhaka University Central Students Union, publicly proposed according the Sheikh the appellation of *Bangabandhu*, Friend of Bengal, which a crowd of more than a hundred thousand people approved with thundering cheers. Nevertheless, there remains a controversy over the issue. While Tofail Ahmed claims that he had publicly proposed to accord Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the appellation of *Bangabandhu* on behalf of the Students Action Committee, and that too in accordance with the ‘prior agreement among the student leaders’⁴¹, some SAC leaders belonging to the organisations other than the Student League assert that neither Tofail Ahmed nor any of his Student League colleagues had ever raised any such issue of according the Sheikh any appellation in any SAC meeting. Of them, M. Shamsuddoha, a SAC leader and general secretary of the pro-Moscow Student Union at the time, categorically writes that Tofail Ahmed ‘suddenly’ made the announcement before the public ‘without any prior discussion with any other leader in any of the previous SAC meetings’.⁴² Shamsuddoha, further writes that ‘none in the SAC would have any objection to the idea of according Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the appellation, while the Student League should have had an official discussion about the issue at the SAC meeting’. He

believes that 'the incident would continue to remain in the history as an example of a cultural problem of our democratic polity'.⁴³

Be that as it may, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman told the mammoth gathering that he 'not only support the 11-Point programme of the student community, but also ready to embrace further imprisonment for getting the demands met through political movement'.⁴⁴ The Sheikh also announced in the public gathering that he would 'attend the proposed roundtable conference [to be hosted by Ayub Khan] in Lahore' and 'put forward the demands of the people of both East and West Pakistan'. He also assured the people that he would 'demand representation in all sectors based on the population of East Pakistan', instead of the existing 'Parity' with West Pakistan.⁴⁵

The Sheikh, who had just been absolved of the allegation of making efforts to dismember Pakistan, also argued in favour of a united Pakistan in the public gathering, saying: "Why should the two wings of Pakistan not be able to live together when the islands of Indonesia could?"⁴⁶

While the Moulana publicly denounced the idea of participating in any roundtable conference hosted by Ayub Khan any more and argued for ousting the autocratic regime of the General through continued movements, the Sheikh prepared the ground for attending the conference to get his demands met through negotiations across the table.

The abortive roundtable Sheikh's return to the East disappointed

The prime objective behind the roundtable of the government of General Ayub Khan and the pro-establishment political parties in the opposition was to de-radicalise the political movements, in the first place, for further radicalisation of the movement would hit the repressive as well as exploitative military-bureaucratic apparatus of the state, which was the prime means of the ruling classes of Pakistan to maintain and perpetuate their political, economic and cultural dominance over the people at large. Then, for the Ayub regime, the immediate objective of the roundtable was to retain power by making certain political concessions, including the sharing of certain amount power, to the opposition parties while the immediate objective of the most opposition parties in question was to obtain certain political concessions—federal democracy and fair elections under the existing politico-economic order, for example, which would pave the way for them to go to power. Nevertheless, given the growing political self-consciousness of different classes of the people in East Pakistan at the time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League had an additional as well as a challenging obligation—securing full regional autonomy, a proposition which had already become the rallying cry of the people's uprising in the East while the West-based politico-military oligarchy remained absolutely opposed to the idea. Thus, the roundtable, as far as the East's vital interests are concerned, was destined to fail.

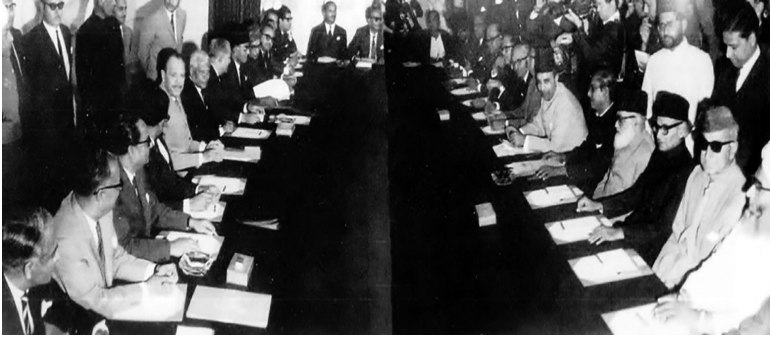


The Students Action Committee holding a huge public rally in the Dhaka city demanding the implementation of its 11 point demands in February 1969. A banner reads: No roundtable conference before the release of Sheikh Mujib.
Photo: Unknown

The people's uprising in Pakistan, particularly in its eastern wing, in the last week of January 1969 contributed not only to the raising of people's political consciousness about their strength and power when united, as every people's movement does, but also radicalised the political view of the masses, particularly that of the workers and the peasants, to the effect that the dismantling of repressive as well as exploitative structure of state and the building of a democratic one with egalitarian socio-economic order on the debris of the old one was not an impossible proposition. There were, after all, two kinds of political slogan, one liberal nationalist and the other radical socialist, being raised by the social forces during the mass uprising against Ayub regime. Santosh Gupta points out: "During the mass-uprising in 1969, the supporters of Awami League and its student front used to chant slogans like *Jegechhe jegechhe, Bangali jegechhe*—the Bengalis have risen—while the supporters of the Left political camp used to chant slogans such as *Muktir ek-i path, shashasra Biplab*—An armed revolution is the only means of people's emancipation."¹

The attempt that the rulers as well as the political bodies of the ruling classes outside power make under such radicalised political circumstances is to forge negotiation among themselves to thwart the political advances of the radicalised masses. In the process of such negotiations, the ruling quarters also accommodate the political forces of same class outside power that aspire to share state power. And there arose the need for the authoritarian regime of Ayub Khan to craft a negotiation with the political opposition through a peaceful 'dialogue' or what it called a roundtable conference.

Mohammad Farhad, a leader of the then pro-Moscow East Pakistan Communist Party, rightly points out: "The mass uprising of January 24 not only made Pakistan's entire ruling coterie afraid of the political situation, it also made the entire class of the bourgeoisie, including those outside power, shaky



The abortive roundtable conference in progress in Rawalpindi in March 1969. Photo: Unknown

about its future. So, the politicians representing the bourgeoisie interests started mounting pressure on the government ‘to save the country from an imminent danger like Russian revolution’ by way of forging negotiations with [opposition] political parties through dialogue.”²

Hence came the initiative from Ayub regime to hold a roundtable with the agitating political parties. President Ayub announced in a televised speech on February 1, 1969 that the ‘Constitution is not anything sacrosanct’ and proposed that he would ‘hold a roundtable to discuss constitutional issues with the leaders of the responsible opposition parties’. Ayub proposed February 17 for the roundtable to end the political impasse, and in order to initiate the proposed dialogue, he issued on February 5 an official letter to Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, convenor of the Democratic Action Committee, inviting the component parties of the alliance to the talks.

The opposition parties and groups apparently considered Ayub Khan’s announcement a victory of the mass uprising while his proposal for dialogue divided the opposition camp. Mohammad Farhad writes: “While the right-wing parties were for using the roundtable dialogue as a means to forge compromise [with the power that be], the Awami League appeared vacillating and Moulana Bhasani’s National Awami Party opposed the idea of having any dialogue with Ayub Khan.”³ The Moulana, in fact, issued a press statement on February 7, rejecting outright the proposed roundtable. Later, the Moulana, while addressing a public rally in the Paltan ground of the Dhaka city on February 16, cautioned the DAC leaders planning to attend Ayub’s roundtable conference that ‘it is impossible to get the demands of the people met through Roundtables’ and argued for launching ‘violent movements’, instead of the non-violent ones, to get the right results.⁴ He also called upon other opposition leaders, particularly Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to boycott the conference.⁵

Subsequently, a journalist asked Moulana Bhaani whether he would not be isolated if he refused to attend Ayub's roundtable conference, to which the Moulana replied, "Yes, I'll isolate myself from Ayub, his entourage and all the bourgeois political leaders. I will not, however, be isolating myself from people."⁶

Following the mass uprising on January 24, the pro-Moscow Communist Party, which was working in the DAC through the pro-Moscow National Awami Party, made an initiative to broaden the anti-Ayub alliance by taking Moulana Bhasani and his National Awami Party on board. But the initiative failed as the Moulana found the DAC, a political combine of heterogeneous forces with contradictory ideological orientations—centrist, Left, Right and extreme Right—an ineffective platform to fight against the powerful military regime. He, rather, wanted, as Mohammad Farhad writes, "Awami League and the pro-Moscow National Awami Party to come out of the DAC, but Awami League refused to leave the political combine."⁷ Besides, while addressing a public rally in Jaypurhat on February 11, the Moulana had unequivocally announced that his party 'would not enter the DAC, for its 8-party programme did not include the demand of regional autonomy'.⁸ The Awami League would eventually leave the DAC, but only after being 'betrayed' by its partners in the alliance during the talks at the roundtable.

In addition to his life-long conviction that political movement is the only decisive means to get people's legitimate demands met, the politically experienced Moulana analysed that General Ayub had already lost his relevance in running the affairs of the state and, therefore, there was no point in having any talks with a powerless man any more. The Moulana's thought found expression in his private talks with his younger political colleagues of the time, including Haider Akbar Khan Rano, when the latter asked his reasons to boycott General

Ayub's roundtable. The Moulana replied: "Why holding talks with Ayub? Is it worth talking to a corpse? Ayub at the moment is a [politically] dead man."⁹ Moulana's leftwing National Awami Party and its labour, peasant and student fronts accepted the argument and continued to mobilize public demonstrations against the autocratic regime in power.

However, Moulana Bhasani and his colleagues were not alone to dissuade the Sheikh from attending Ayub's roundtable. Rather, as the Sheikh's son-in-law Dr. Wajed Miah reminisces, the top youth and student leaders associated with Awami League, such as 'Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni, Sirajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzak, Abdur Rauf, Khaled Mohammad Ali, Tofail Ahmed and others [also] insisted unanimously on February 23 that Bangabandhu [Sheikh Mujibur Rahman] should not attend the Roundtable, until General Ayub agreed to officially discuss the contents of the East's Six-and 11-Point charters of demands in the conference'.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the Sheikh refused to be persuaded by the sections of political leaders and activists from within and without his party to boycott the roundtable, and left Dhaka for Rawalpindi to attend the conference with a nine-member delegation of his party the next day. Moreover, he had an exclusive meeting with General Ayub Khan on February 25, the day before the roundtable conference officially opened.¹¹ As regards the meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, General Ayub notes in his diary on February 26, "Mujib came to see me last night. Our talk was cordial. He seemed conciliatory, though making no bones that he was the uncrowned king of East Pakistan and he must be recognized as such. There was no give and take in his points."¹²

Meanwhile, East Pakistan's pro-Moscow Communist Party found the Moulana a political 'adventurist' for the latter's refusal to attend Ayub's roundtable conference.¹³ The later development of political events, however, testifies that the



General Ayub Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman shaking hands during the roundtable conference held in Rawalpindi in March 1969. Photo: Unknown

Moulana rather proved a principled and farsighted politician, both by way of refusing to enter the DAC and then staying out of the roundtable conference, for the roundtable ended in a whimper and the DAC got dismantled immediately after the roundtable.

The roundtable conference commenced in Rawalpindi on February 26, which was postponed, due to Eid vacation, to resume on March 10.

Meanwhile, the DAC leaders reached a consensus on March 9 on a four-point demand that they would unanimously place during the talks with President Ayub Khan. The demands included general elections based on universal franchise, introduction of parliamentary system of governance with a federal form of government, full regional autonomy and the scrapping of the provision of One Unit for West Pakistan while uniting the Western provinces under a sub-federation. Subsequently, in his written statement at the conference, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman categorically said, “The Democratic Action Committee has held detailed deliberations regarding these grave and challenging national issues. There has always been complete unanimity in the Democratic Action Committee on the imperative necessity of effecting the following constitutional changes: (a) The establishment of federal parliamentary democracy. (b) The introduction of a system of direct elections based on universal franchise.”¹⁴ Besides, the Sheikh said in the conference, “A consensus has also been apparent among the members of the Committee on the following matters: (a) The dismemberment of One Unit and the establishment of a Sub-federation in West Pakistan. (b) Full regional autonomy being granted to the regions.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, as the talks progressed, most DAC leaders, particularly its West Pakistani co-ordinator Nawabjada Nasrullah Khan claimed that the opposition alliance had only two agreed points—general elections based on universal franchise and

introduction of federal parliamentary system of governance— to place before the President. Moreover, two DAC leaders from the West, Chaudhry Mohammad Ali (1905–1980) of the *Nezam-e-Islami* and Moulana Abul A'la Maududi (1903–1979) of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, rather opposed the idea of full regional autonomy and the scrapping of One Unit for West Pakistan.¹⁶ The right-wing leaders from East Pakistan reportedly kept silent over the issues in question.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman also pressed President Ayub Khan for accepting the East's legitimate aspirations reflected in the Six- and 11-Point charters of demands, but neither President Ayub Khan nor any other politician from the West even agreed to consider the points to be on the official agenda for discussion, let alone accepting them for implementations. The East Pakistani leaders from the DAC also refused to incorporate the Six- and 11-Points into the agenda for discussions. The result was obvious: The roundtable ended with General Ayub Khan, the martial President of Pakistan, meeting only two opposition demands that primarily the pro-establishment politicians from West Pakistan were comfortable with: introduction of federal parliamentary democracy and holding general elections based on universal adult franchise, and that too on condition of further reviews.¹⁷ The most important issues relating to the vital political, economic and administrative interests of the people of the East—full regional autonomy and dismemberment of the One Unit system—were completely ignored by the West-based powers that be. While the 'full regional autonomy' for East Bengal, which was a fundamental incentive for the people of the East to play a decisive role in the Pakistan movement,¹⁸ would have enabled the people of the East to shape their future independently, without hindrances created by the West-based politico-military oligarchy, the dismantling of the One Unit system would have made it easier for the East to get rid of the combined efforts of the landed aristocracy belonging to

the four provinces of the West against the legitimate interest of the eastern province. The One Unit scheme was conceived by the West-based rulers, as Tariq Ali analysed, because, “[The scheme] would abolish provincial autonomy in West Pakistan and bring landlords of the Punjab, Baluchistan, Sind and the [North Western] Frontier Province together. Also a ‘united’ West Pakistan would be better able to combat the [legitimate] demands of East Bengal.”¹⁹ The Sheikh, indeed, had reasons to get frustrated about the outcome of the roundtable.

Earlier, as the Sheikh arrived in Lahore on February 24, *en route* Rawalpindi to attend the roundtable conference, he moved ahead ‘to meet people in the crowd’ in the airport and ‘someone inflicted a small knife wound on his hand’.²⁰ Later, on March 15, the day after the conference had been over, ‘Bhasani’, who went to West Pakistan to address some public rallies and watch the political atmosphere during the talks, ‘was attacked by some assailants in a train’.²¹ Rano, however, writes specifically that the Moulana came under attack of ‘some Islamist fundamentalists’ at the Shahiwal railway station of the Punjab on March 16. Subsequently, a general strike was observed in Dhaka in protest against the attack the next day.²²

Sheikh eventually returned to Dhaka on March 13. Before his return, the Sheikh had a private dinner with Ayub Khan on March 13, the day the conference ended.²³ Earlier, on March 6, he had an exclusive meeting with General Yahya Khan in Rawalpindi.²⁴ On his return to Dhaka, the Sheikh ‘immediately announced his decision to sever off Awami League’s relation with the 8-party DAC’.²⁵

Rano recalls: “On his return to Dhaka airport, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman directly accused some DAC leaders, such as Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, Farid Ahmed, Abdus Salam Khan and Mahmud Ali, of betraying the Bengali cause at the roundtable, for which he could not get the demand for East Pakistan’s autonomy met in Rawalpindi’.²⁶ He, however, praised

the role that Nurul Amin, Mozaffar Ahmad and [Justice] S M Murshid had played at the conference.²⁷

In another development of the post-roundtable political scenario, "The extreme right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami sharpened its attacks, and undertook adverse propaganda, against the left-wing forces of the country. The Jamaat chief Moududi even announced, "The tongues of those would be severed off who would even utter the word 'socialism'." Clashes took place between the workers of Bhasani's National Awami Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami across the country."²⁸ The 'Jamat-e-Islami's prime target of attacks was the communists—the Soviet Union and China'.²⁹ Bhasani's 'National Awami Party observed a successful general strike in Dhaka on March 17'.³⁰

Meanwhile, Moulana Bhasani and his party continued to agitate against the autocratic regime.

Deposing of the dictator

Moulana Bhasani, who struck the spark of the mass uprising in early December 1968, did not sit idle while others were busy trying to forge a compromise with the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan. Even Mohammad Farhad, the pro-Moscow communist leader who found the boycott of Ayub's roundtable to be 'political adventurism' on part of the Moulana, admits the latter's continued efforts to get the demands of the working classes met. Farhad writes, "Although he boycotted the roundtable conference out of political adventurism, Moulana Bhasani continued to ceaselessly propagate the need of materializing the demands of the workers and the peasants."¹ And, in order to do that, the Moulana continued to politically inspire the working classes of both East and West Pakistan to take to the streets.

Inspired by the Moulana, the 'gherao movement of the industrial workers began in Khulna, which was followed by the workers in Tangi, and then it started spreading across the country'. Mohammad Farhad writes, "While the pro-Peking left took the initiatives in Khulna and Tangi, *gherao* became a popular form of movement everywhere. The spark of the *gherao* movement spread in the entire province like a wildfire within a very short period. The workers applied the form of movement to almost all kinds of factories—small, medium and big—to realise their economic demands, [...] but no incident of violence or anarchy took place during the *gheraos*."²

Like the industrial workers, public and private sector



Moulana Bhasani is seen with the protesting industrial workers from Tangi in March 1969. Photo: Naib Uddin Ahmed

employees, and professional groups of the physicians, the journalists, the teachers and the cleaner communities also resorted to various types of movement, such as gherao, strike, sit-in and protest rallies, to realise their respective sets of demands. In most cases, the protesting professional groups and employees succeeded to get their legitimate demands met.

Rano, a labour leader those days, recollects: “In March, the *gherao* movement spread in rural areas. [...] Most B[asic] D[emocrat]s and U[nion] P[arishad] chairmen began to resign. The SAC asked them to resign. The Sheikh, who was now the tallest leader, called upon the people to maintain law and order. Still, the entire East Pakistan continued to turn into the hot bed of movement. [...] The protesting villagers set fire to the Tahshil offices, signifying the fact that the people had pent-up anger against the corrupt land record officers. Noticeably, although the people were in a very militant mood, there was hardly any clash took place out of personal rivalry during those days of political movement. [...] In some areas, the protesters set up ‘people’s court’ and publicly tried the socially identified criminals and punished them, in some cases with death sentences.³

Rehman Sobhan, a left-wing economist those days, points to the ‘enemies’ that the workers and peasants of the East targeted during the March uprising. He writes: “The uprising in the rural areas was mostly targeted at the BD[s] who had grown fat on the corruption originating in the R[ural] P[ublic] W[orks] P[rogramme]. [...] The workers, who had been exposed to decline in real wages within an industrial regime dominated by non-Bengali capitalists, were resorting to gheraos or siege tactics of their employers, to extract higher wages.”⁴ The condition of the Basic Democrats of West Pakistan, particularly in urban areas was no different for, as Khalid B. Sayeed, a reputed [West] Pakistani historian, notes that they ‘became fairly affluent overnight by obtaining transport licenes and

permits for government ration shops' and observes that 'the rapid and enormous increase in wealth of the Basic Democrats was so conspicuous that it was bound to lead to their widespread unpopularity'.⁵

Moreover, the industrial workers of West Pakistan resorted to the 'gherao movement' to materialise 'certain concrete demands relating to wages, living conditions, and certain desired changes in the economic and political systems', despite the fact that 'all genuine trade union activity had virtually been disallowed by the Ayub regime'. The 'labour militancy' reached its peak in Karachi and Lahore in March. Reports show that 'by 24 March', 'virtually all the factories of Karachi comprising some 40 per cent of Pakistan's industrial capacity were on strike'.

Khaleed B. Sayeed explains this 'massive uprising of labour militancy' by the 'appearance of East Pakistani populist and peasant leader Moulana Bhasani in West Pakistan' in March of 1969. Sayeed writes: "In his fiery speeches throughout West Pakistan he justified virtual confiscation of private industrial wealth through wholesale nationalization of all industries on the plea that this kind of socialism was sanctioned and blessed by Islam. [...] No other East Pakistani leader had ever stirred the poorer sections and particularly the industrial labour of West Pakistan as much as Bhasani did in early 1969."⁶

In the face of such an explosive mass movement, General Ayub's cabinet decided in the evening of March 20 to impose Martial Law immediately, but the General resolved to take a longer time the next morning, particularly when he discovered that 'several DAC leaders' issued press 'statements' in 'his support' the day before. Earlier, on March 8, General Ayub had told General Yahya that the latter might have to 'go into action' [...] 'perhaps on the 11th or 12th April'.⁷ Ayub, therefore, replaced Monem Khan and General Musa, the governors of East and West Pakistan respectively, who had earned enormous

notoriety in their provinces, with Dr. M. N. Huda (1919–1991) and Yusuf Abdullah Haroon (1916–2011) on March 21 and then sent a delegation to General Yahya to communicate his new resolve that the ‘decision to impose martial law was premature’. But an impatient Yahya reacted sharply to the idea of delaying the Army’s intervention.

Referring to the conversation that his delegation had with Yahya on the revised plan to delay the promulgation of Martial Law, Ayub wrote in his diary on March 21, 1969: “General Yahya was annoyed and said that the new governors cannot carry out miracles nor can the constitutional changes calm situation. He will carry out his duty to the country. It was clear as to what Gen. Yahya was heading for.”⁸ The Defence Secretary, Giasuddin Ahmad, who was also present at the meeting, but already won over by General Yahya, said that ‘the President must step aside and allow the army to decide the timing and phasing of martial law’.⁹ The Defence Minister, Admiral A. R. Khan, told President Ayub the previous evening that ‘if we wait any longer [to impose martial law] some young colonel might get impatient’—a suggestion, which was nothing but a deliberately conveyed threat manufactured by General Yahya, who was actually getting ‘impatient’ to take over power¹⁰ and indication of shifting loyalties by Ayub’s hitherto close associates. Evidently, it was one of those moments for General Ayub when the opportunist partners in crimes abandon the ring leader in the times of crisis and offer their services to the potential new boss. Eager to ‘install’ his own government, General Yahya Khan, in fact, had been establishing political contacts with some politicians in both the wings of Pakistan. In the East, for example, the General had an exclusive meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Rawalpindi on March 6.¹¹

General Ayub Khan had now been left with no option but to quit power, for the people would not allow him to cling to the power any more, on the one hand, while his military



Industrial workers demonstrating against the Ayub regime in Lahore in March 1969 while the central banner reads, 'End the ban on trade unions'. Source: Tariq Ali's book—*Pakistan: Military Rule or Peoples Power*.

deputy, General Yahya Khan, became eager to take his leader's throne without any further delay, on the other. Ayub found his nemesis. Under such a compelling circumstance, President Ayub's normative political obligation was to handover power to the Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly, Justice Abdul Jabbar Khan (1902–1984), who happened to be a Bengali, but the martial President did not take that legitimate path. Instead, Ayub Khan illegitimately urged General Yahya Khan in black and white on March 24, 1969 to take over power for, as he wrote, 'patriotism has been a constant source of inspiration' for Yahya and it was Yahya's 'legal and constitutional responsibility to defend the country not only against external aggression but also save it from internal disorder and chaos'.¹² General Ayub simply wrote a letter to the Speaker informing the latter about his Presidential resolve.¹³ Then, in his 'last' address as President, General Ayub announced his resignation the next day for, as he claimed, it was 'impossible' for him 'to preside over the destruction' of Pakistan.¹⁴ He left the job of 'destruction', as history would eventually witness, to Yahya.

General Ayub's autocratic regime came to an end, due primarily to the pervasive revolt of the masses across Pakistan—'the revolt' that, even according to Ayub's closest civil bureaucrat, Altaf Gauhar, 'arose out of the people's refusal to accept any restrictions on their right of franchise or expression'.¹⁵ In the revolts, the people of East Pakistan essentially played the vital role and they had legitimate reasons to do so—political, economic and cultural. Recognising the legitimacy, again, Altaf Gauhar admits: "East Bengal, in particular, blamed and not without justification, the [West Pakistan based] central government of exploiting the resources of the province and denying the people their fundamental rights."¹⁶ The legitimate grievances of the East and the subsequent series of political movements of the Bengalis for democratic parity eventually influenced a large section of the people of the West. Gauhar

observes, “The provinces, particularly East Bengal, felt they had lost their identity in Ayub’s unitary form of government. The governors of the provinces were mere agents of the President and the provincial assemblies were composed mostly of nominees of the administration, parading as representatives of people. The struggle of the Bengalis for greater freedom evoked spontaneous response from the smaller provinces of West Pakistan, which were groaning under the yoke of Punjabi and Pathan domination.”¹⁷ Hence was the pervasive political movement, which was often synchronised between the protesting forces of democracy of both the wings, against Ayub’s autocratic regime. As for the regime’s rhetorical slogan of ‘development’, a section of the ‘Western social scientists’, who remained completely ignorant of the abysmal conditions of the poor masses, used to certify the General’s economic programmes to be ‘a model of development’ for the Third World countries. The ordinary masses had no business with such baseless certificates. They rather responded, with all their inherent might, to the oppositionist political call to take to the streets for a change. The regime was ousted from power. Before his ouster, Ayub also started realising the hollowness of his programmes, economic and otherwise, for he confided in Altaf Gauhar: “We managed to bluff the world but our own people called the bluff.”¹⁸ Hence his time was up.

However, while the leaders of the Students’ Action Committee played a vital role in mobilizing supports of the urban middle classes for the movement against General Ayub’s autocratic regime, Moulana Bhasani played the most crucial role in transforming the movement into a marvellous mass uprising across the country that overthrew the regime. Arati Datta (1924–2011), a communist party leader and mother of Deepa Datta, who was an iconic student leader in 1969, rightly recalls: “Moulana Bhasani played an extra-ordinary role in transforming the anti-Ayub movement into a mass-uprising

against the General's autocratic regime. The Moulana used to project the anti-people policies of the Ayub regime in the huge public meetings in rural areas and popularise the demand for the release of political prisoners that ultimately forced the government to release all the accused including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Agartala Conspiracy Case.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the contribution of Moulana Bhasani and other politicians from both the wings of Pakistan as well as that of the student leaders and activists of both wings notwithstanding, it was the ordinary people who played the decisive role in the streets to depose the Ayub regime. In the process, it was, again, the poor people who rendered most sacrifices in ousting the autocratic regime. That the poor classes of people made the highest sacrifices becomes clear in the class identities of those who sacrificed their lives while putting up resistance against the regime's coercive forces deployed to suppress the democratic movement. History records that Ayub's police and military establishments killed at least 61 people in East Pakistan alone during anti-autocracy protests in 1969 while majority of the martyred in question came from the poor classes of the population. Of the deceased, 29 were industrial workers, 21 students, 3 peasants, 3 ordinary employees, 2 teachers, 1 soldier, 1 housewife and the other anonymous. Again, of the 29 workers who were killed, 20 were industrial workers, 1 hotel boy, 1 ice-cream vendor, 1 tailor, 1 shopkeeper, 1 bicycle mechanic, 1 printing press worker, 1 carpenter and the other was a Class-IV worker of the Water and Power Development Authority.²⁰ The class identities of most of the martyred in West Pakistan in the stipulated period have no reason to be different. The ordinary masses of both the wings were hell-bent on getting rid of the autocratic regime of General Ayub Khan and replace it with a political administration committed to democracy and pluralism with egalitarian outlook towards the economic development of the people. But, alas, this was not to happen.

Epilogue

Renewal of the old order, and thereafter

The people did their job by overthrowing the autocratic regime of General Ayub Khan, but there was no strong political party of people as such to replace a military junta in its own right. The leftwing was fragmented,¹ the middle-roaders failed to reach a consensus on installing an interim civilian government while the Army was longing for power. Under the circumstance, President Ayub Khan comfortably ‘stepped aside’ ‘to pave the way for General Yahya Khan to ‘step in’ on March 25, 1969. The anti-climax was obvious: General Ayub’s quasi-military government was replaced with General Yahya’s fully-fledged military regime.

Tariq Ali writes that General Yahya’s Martial Law ‘was welcomed by all the bourgeois political leaders [from West Pakistan] including Bhutto’. Of the top politicians from the East, he writes, “[Moulana] Bhasani claimed he was opposed to it, and [Sheikh] Mujibur Rahman remained silent.”² Thus, despite a countrywide massive political uprising of the people aspiring to establish a democratic social, political and economic order, the changeover merely changed the *dramatis personae* at the helm of the affairs, keeping intact the same old inherently autocratic military-bureaucratic state machine to continue to oppress and exploit the people at large. This was really a ‘renewal of the old order’, primarily because of the absence of a revolutionary political party of the people, which is said to be capable of establishing a truly democratic state on the debris of

a politically oppressive and economically exploitative system.

Be that as it may, the prolonged and pervasive political movement in question substantially contributed to the raising of political consciousness of the people of Pakistan, in general, and that of the masses of East Pakistan, in particular, which would find expression in the electoral campaign in 1970 and then in the East's popular armed resistance against the West's genocidal military crackdown resulting in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

Meanwhile, the deposed General Ayub, Yahya Khan's 'architect, creator, mentor and guru', wrote an 'Office Leaving Note' providing Yahya with certain sense of direction as regards managing the affairs of the state under the complex political circumstances and became eager to speak to Yahya about it. But, alas, General Yahya, now the 'Saviour of the nation', did not have time even to receive Ayub's phone call. Moreover, Yahya's newly appointed Chief of Staff, General Syed Ghulam Mohy-ud-Din M Peerzada, communicated to Ayub's Aide-de-camp, Arshad Sami Khan, that the new junta was not at all interested in taking Ayub's 'prescriptions' and following his 'suggestions and advice'.³ Instead, General Peerzada, who was President Ayub's Military Secretary the other day, put forward a very humiliating piece of advice to his former boss that 'he should immediately vacate the presidential premises and proceed abroad, or at least leave the capital for a while'.⁴ General Ayub 'expected to stay in the President's House for three months and to retain his personal staff' for the period.⁵ Ayub found Peerzada a 'poisonous snake in the grass'⁶, but he had to leave the President's House for Swat quite unceremoniously in the 'hazy morning' of April 1, 1969. In another development in East Pakistan, the provincial wing of the Ayub-led Muslim League (Convention), headed by Abdur Sabur Khan, demanded at a meeting in Dhaka on July 27, which was reported by Dhaka-based *Dainik Pakistan* the next day, 'the Ayub-Monem

duo be tried publicly for abuse of power and corrupt practices'. General Ayub's post-ouster developments in question proved once again the irony of history that when out of power, even the immediate beneficiaries of his/her autocratic governance immediately disowns a dictator—military or otherwise.

Be that as it may, as General Yahya took over the day after, on March 25, 1969, the industrial workers of East Pakistan took to the streets against the newly imposed martial law. The agitating workers came under military repression in some areas while humbling the repressive army in other areas. The industrial workers in Chittagong brought the port city to a standstill.⁷

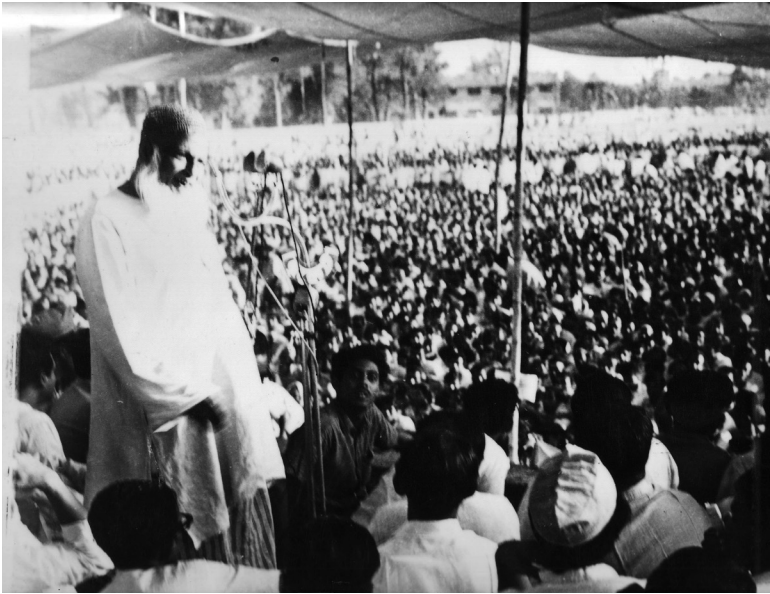
The student community, which had played a vital role in ousting the Ayub regime, however, failed to put up immediate resistance against the newly imposed martial law of the new military regime, primarily due to the reluctance of the major political parties, particularly the Awami League, that took a 'wait and watch' policy towards Yahya regime. As the news of the promulgation of martial law by General Yahya was being broadcast in the Radio, Dhaka University's agitated students, poised to take to the streets, sought the opinion of the SAC leaders who were having a meeting at the Sergeant Zahurul Huq Hall premises. Upon hearing the news, the student leaders resolved to consult with the national level political leaders. They could not contact Moulana Bhasani immediately as he was out of town at his Santosh residence. They succeeded to get Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman over phone, but 'he said slowly but firmly', according to Nurul Islam Nahid, then a leader of the pro-Moscow Student Union and now an Awami League leader, 'Wait and see'.⁸

The reason was simple. General Yahya's new Martial Law imposed new restrictions on political activities while the Sheikh was opposed to disturb Yahya who had privately promised to the top League leader to hold general elections—the only

thing that he apparently needed to take his party to power. Rano explains, “Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was against the idea of violating martial law. He knew that his party was then at the peak of its popularity and the only thing the party needed for going to power was a general election. He was, therefore, against any disorder that might stand in the way of holding elections.”⁹ The Sheikh, after all, had contact with General Yahya and, therefore, knew that the latter would announce a general election soon. Rehman Sobhan, an economist from East Pakistan who had good rapport with top Awami League leaders those days, writes that during an exclusive talks with the Sheikh when the latter was in West Pakistan to attend Ayub’s roundtable, Yahya “indicated [...] that when he took over from Ayub, he would concede to an election based on ‘one person one vote’.”¹⁰

“In fact”, Mohammad Farhad points out, “after his release from prison, Sheikh Mujib started making efforts to slow down all kinds of political movements. [...] The Students League followed suit, and therefore proposed withdrawal of a previous SAC call for the resignations of the [MNAs, MLAs and] the BDs.”¹¹ The SAC eventually extended the deadline for the resignations from March 3 to May 3. Farhad observes, “The Awami League and its associates became scared of the consequence of political stirring of rural areas. They thought that they would soon go to power and, therefore, the mass movement should be contained as soon as possible.”¹²

General Yahya Khan, who took over power from General Ayub Khan on March 25, 1969, assumed the posts of both President and Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan and announced the next day, as most usurpers of power do, that he had ‘no political ambition’ and that he would make arrangements for holding a general election based on universal adult franchise and transfer power to people’s representatives ‘as soon as possible’.



As part of the continuous movement after the fall of the Ayub regime, Moulana Bhasani addressing a huge public gathering at the Mymensingh Circuit House ground in March 1970. Photo: Naib Uddin Ahmed

The leaders of the student community of the East, however, brought out ‘a huge protest procession in violation of General Yahya’s martial law on April 22, 1969—the day he paid his first visit to Dhaka as President and Chief Martial Law Administrator. Subsequently, the regional martial law administration summoned four student leaders of the time—Tofail Ahmed, M. Shamsuddoha, Mostafa Zamal Haider and Ibrahim Khalil—on September 15, 1969, some five months after the incident, on charge of violating certain provisions of the Martial Law.¹³ The student leaders concerned did not comply the way the martial law authorities desired then to resolve the issue, but the issue was eventually settled ‘amicably’ through a negotiation brokered by two Bengali civil bureaucrats of the time—Mujibur Huq and M K Anwar—in the last week of September.¹⁴

Moulana continues to stir mass consciousness

While the extraordinary public revolt against General Ayub’s autocratic regime met a politically abortive end with the taking over by General Yahya’s military regime, the people began to return home, particularly after the Sheikh’s Awami League and its political affiliates left the streets following the new military junta’s assurance of holding general elections. The Moulana’s National Awami Party and its affiliates, on the other hand, refused to come to terms with General Yahya, or comply with his martial law regulations, for he was convinced that ordinary people of Pakistan, in general, and those of the East, in particular, did not sacrifice lives and suffered police atrocities only to replace General Ayub Khan’s autocratic regime with the military regime of another General, or install a civilian government for that matter, which would continue to serve the interests of the rich classes of the country. Besides, the Moulana knew it was extremely important to politically radicalise the toiling masses, peasants and industrial workers in particular, to force the rulers to submit to the cause of the people.

He, therefore, continued to stir up political consciousness of the people at large, despite General Yahya's efforts to keep him in good humour.

In one of his appeasement efforts, General Yahya Khan, while on a visit to Dhaka 'in the late 1969', wanted to have talks with Moulana Bhasani. The Moulana was informed of the 'Presidential desire', but he did not turn up. Subsequently, some military men brought a reluctant Moulana to Dhaka from his rural Santosh residence and took him to Yahya. Then Yahya asked Bhasani, "Moulana Shahib, please tell me what kinds of administrative programmes should I take for East Pakistan that would make the Bengalis happy?" In response, the Moulana said, "You are supposed to know that better, for you are running the administration." A visibly unhappy Yahya retorted, "So, is agitation your only job?" An undaunted Bhasani nodded his head in approval, "Yes, agitation is my job."¹⁵

The oppositionist Moulana remained true to his commitment to 'agitation' for politically radicalising the oppressed classes of society, and that too without caring about as well as caring for power.

In order to advance the cause of the poor peasants in the midst of power struggle, the Moulana called an open peasant conference in Shahpur of the Pabna district in October 1969, obviously in defiance of Yahya regime as it was still 'illegal' under certain provisions of the martial law regulations to hold any political gathering in public. As the martial law authorities objected to the idea of holding the peasants conference in a huge playground under the sky, the Moulana 'erected a few make-shift bamboo walls here and there of the huge open space' and claimed that it had now become an 'indoor venue' and, therefore, it was not illegal. Rano writes that the military authorities 'repeatedly dissuade the Moulana from holding the conference but the latter refused to comply'.¹⁶ The military authorities concerned were forced, particularly in the wake of

the huge mass uprising against Ayub regime only a few months ago, to look the other way.

Rano recollects that ‘more than a hundred thousand peasants attended the conference’ while ‘all the factions of the pro-Peking camp of the Left had been present’ and the Moulana ‘issued the call for establishing socialism, proletarian regime of the workers and the peasants’ in the midst of a roaring slogan—*Sramik-Krishak Astra Dharo, Purba Bangla Swadhin Karo*, which means ‘Workers and peasants take arms to liberate East Bengal’.¹⁷ This was the historic conference that adopted the resolution, proposed by Abdul Matin, seeking to create ‘peasant volunteers with red caps on’ in the professed conviction that these peasants would eventually ‘become the revolutionary guerrillas’ for the liberation of the country.¹⁸

The Moulana continued to hold such peasant conferences across the East until March 1971, all in defiance of General Yahya’s Martial Law regulations. He held a peasant conference in Santosh of Tangail district on January 19, 1970, the next conference he held in Mahipur on April 12 the same year, then one in the Dhaka Racecourse ground on October 2, 1971, then another in the Mymensingh Circuit House ground on March 12, 1971, then one in Narayanpur of Bhairab the next day. In all those conferences, the Moulana used to chant a slogan—*Hate nao Hatiar, Bajao Bisshan*, which means ‘take up weapons, play the bugle’.¹⁹

Recollecting those days of the people’s uprising, Arati Datta writes in her memoirs, ‘Moulana Shahib was holding a series of big rallies and besieging police stations with protesting masses in rural areas at the time. There was a popular slogan those days—*Krishak Sramik Astra Dharo, Bangladesh Swadhin Karo*, meaning ‘take up arms peasants and workers, liberate Bangladesh’.²⁰

Following the treacherous failure of West Pakistan’s politico-military oligarchy to honour the East’s electoral

victory in late 1970, the peasants in question would really ‘take up arms and play the bugle’ of liberation war and discharge the responsibilities of the ‘revolutionary guerrillas’ during the country’s war of national independence and ‘liberate’ the country from the neo-colonial chains of Pakistan in 1971. A K Khandaker, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the liberation force who was in charge of ‘training and operations’ of the Freedom Fighters between July and December 1971, points out that ‘the youths from the peasant families contributed most to the liberation war, for they constituted 80 per cent of the liberation fighters.’²¹

However, the Left political camp, which originally envisaged the programme of national independence and raised the political consciousness of the peasants and workers to that effect, failed to reap the political benefit of the successful people’s war for the poor classes of the people, due to various limitations—strategic and tactical, not to mention its fragmentations over doctrinal disputes. The result is obvious: 50 years after the rebellious mass uprising against autocracy in the neo-colonial dispensation of Pakistan in 1969 and 48 years after achieving independence through blood and fire from the neo-colonialist state in 1971, the poor classes of the people of Bangladesh continue to suffer autocratic regimes as well as extreme inequality, injustice and indignity that such regimes politically nurture.

Fifty years after the ouster of an autocratic regime in the face of a vigorous mass movement, the realities of the day, indeed, calls for a politically organised replenished rebellion of the masses, this time for the democratic transformation of the state and the establishment of an egalitarian socio-economic order, while the historical memories of the 1969 mass uprising against autocracy would serve as a great reminder of the enormous ‘power’ inherent in the people to make the ‘impossible’ possible.

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Notes and references

Prologue

Restoring confidence in public resistance

1. The ‘Proclamation of Independence’, issued by Bangladesh’s government-in exile, see in Hassan Hafizur Rahman (ed.), *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddha: Dalilpatra*, (Henceforth BSJD) Volume-3, reprint, Ministry of Information, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2003, pp.4-5
2. The ruling Awami League and its partners retained power through the general elections in January 2014, which was boycotted all the opposition parties of the country, with candidates of 154 parliamentary constituencies out of total of 300 were declared elected uncontested while not more than 10 per cent of the electorates went to the polling stations of the rest 146 constituencies. Then, in the December 2018 general elections, which were participated by almost all the opposition parties, the ruling party and its partners had reportedly stuffed decisive number of ballots, with the active cooperation of the previously organized partisan civil bureaucracy and the law enforcing agencies, the night before the election day. For details of the degrees and dimensions of manipulations and irregularities in 2018 elections, see Ali Reaz, *Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election*, Palgrave Macmillian, Singapore, 2019, particularly its chapter 6, styled as “The Mechanism of Manipulation” and chapter 7, styled as “The Election Day: Fear, Exclusion and Persecution Come Together”, pp. 57-81
3. Professor Rehman Sobhan, Tajuddin Ahmad Memorial Trust Fund Lecture 2019, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, December 24, 2019, p. 10
4. The Berlin based corruption watch dog, Transparency International showed in its report released on January 29, 2019 that Bangladesh

ranked the 13th most corrupt country, among 180 countries of the world in 2018 while continued to be ranked 2nd among eight South Asian countries after Afghanistan. The TI report is cited in a news report, “TI sees graft on rise in Bangladesh”, New Age, Dhaka, January 30, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/63212/ti-sees-graft-on-rise-in-bangladesh>

- 5 The amount of defaulted loans from different banks swelled to Tk 1,16,288 crore at the end of September 2019 from Tk 1,12,425 crore in June the same year. By adding the written off loans to the tune of Tk 53,258 crore and the loans amounting to Tk 80,000 crore, the recovery of which was stalled due to court proceedings, the total defaulted loans would be Tk 2,49,546 crore. (See “Default loans hit Tk 1,16,288cr”, New Age, Dhaka, December 2, 2019. <http://www.newagebd.net/article/91964/default-loans-hit-tk-116288cr>)
- 6 The United Nation’s Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report—(LDCs Report—2019: The Present and Future External Development: Old Dependence New Challenges—released on November 20, 2019 shows that ‘about 5.9 billion dollars were siphoned off from Bangladesh in 2015, taking the amount illicit outflows to 81.74 billion in 11 years since 2005’. The report shows that the illicit outflows accounted for 36 percent of tax revenue and 3 per cent of the gross domestic product in 2015. The report is cited in a news report, “Bangladesh exposure to capital flight very high: UNCTAD report”, New Age, Dhaka, November 21, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/91227/bangladesh-exposure-to-capital-flight-very-high-unctad-report>
- 7 The Dhaka-based Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) shows in the report of a study—*Pursuing Social Development for Achieving Inclusive Growth: Issues and Priorities*—in February 2019 that the richest 5 per cent of the households were 32 times richer than the poorest 5 per cent in 2010 while the difference magnified astronomically in 2015 when the richest 5 per cent was 121 times richer than the poorest 5 per cent. Notably, the CPD analysis is ‘based on’ the Preliminary Report on Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016, conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2016.
- 8 The report of the Global Hunger Index, released on December 9, 2019, reveals that ‘over 2.35 crore people of Bangladesh remain undernourished due to lack of adequate food’ while ‘South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal performed better than Bangladesh

- in reducing hunger'. The GHI finding is cited in a news report, "Global Hunger Index: 2.3 crore without enough food in Bangladesh," New Age, Dhaka, December 10, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/93187/235cr-without-enough-food-in-bangladesh>
- 9 As many as 546 cases of enforced disappearances were reported between January 2009 and November 2019 while the whereabouts of 166 victims, including political leaders belonging to the opposition camp, a former military official and a former lawmaker, remain still unknown till writing of the 'prologue' on December 10, 2019. The statistics, prepared by a Dhaka based rights watchdog, is cited in a news report, "Rights abuses go unabated in Bangladesh as NHRC bypasses mandate", New Age, Dhaka, December 10, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/93186/rights-abuses-go-unabated-in-bangladesh-as-nhrc-bypasses-mandate>
 - 10 As many as 2,290 people were killed extra-judicially by different state agencies under the guise of 'crossfire', 'gunfight' or 'encounter' between January 2009 and November 2019. The statistics, prepared by a Dhaka based rights watchdog, is cited in a news report, "Rights abuses go unabated in Bangladesh as NHRC bypasses mandate", New Age, Dhaka, December 10, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/93186/rights-abuses-go-unabated-in-bangladesh-as-nhrc-bypasses-mandate>. As many as 207 people were victims of extra-judicial murders committed by the state agencies only in the first half of the year of 2019. Of them 201 were cross-fired, 4 shot to death, one tortured to death, one beaten to death. Earlier, in 2018, as many as 466 people got victim of extra-judicial murders either in state custody or in the so-called 'gunfight' or crossfire. See New Age, Dhaka, July 13, 2019
 - 11 Anwar Hossain Manju, "Kshama Kariben Manik Mia", Dainik Ittefaq, Dhaka, December 24, 2019.
 - 12 For the original report of the Journalists Sans Frontiers, see <https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh>. The Index is also cited in a news report, "Press freedom in Bangladesh lowest in South Asia," in New Age, Dhaka on April 19, 2019. See <http://www.newagebd.net/article/70260/press-freedom-in-bangladesh-lowest-in-south-asia>

First illegitimate takeover of power in Pakistan: A decade of oppressive silence

- 1 Tofazzal Hossain (Manik Mia), *Pakistani Rajnitir Beesh Bachhar*, p. 95
- 2 Ian Stephens, *Pakistan: Old Country New Nation*, p. 301
- 3 Ibid., p. 303
- 4 Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachhar*, p. 481
- 5 While East Pakistan witnessed the rise and fall of governments in 48 hours in June 1956, Pakistan witnessed three Prime Ministers—Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, I. I. Chundrgar and Malik Feroz Khan Noon—at the Centre between 1956 and 1958.
6. The Pakistan Times is cited in Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 85
- 7 Tofazzal Hossain (Manik Mia), *Pakistani Rajnitir Beesh Bachhar*, p.107
- 8 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, pp. 47-48
- 9 Ian Stephens, *Pakistan: Old Country New Nation*, p. 302
- 10 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, pp. 87
- 11 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 112
- 12 Kazi Zafar Ahmed, *Amar Rajnitir Shat Bachhar: Joar-Bhatar Kathan*, p. 97. Haider Akbar Khan Rano, however, writes that Kazi Abdul Bari was arrested on charge of distributing an anti-martial law leaflet. See Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 64
- 13 Mahfuz Ullah, *Purba Pakistan Chhatra Union: Gouraber Dinlipi: 1952–1971*, p. 111
- 14 Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas: 1830 Theke 1971*, p. 243
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Earlier, General Ayub Khan appointed an 11-member Commission on February 17, 1960, headed by Justice Muhammad Shahabuddin, to recommend a new constitution of the state, accommodating the provisions of the General's so-called Basic Democracy. The Commission submitted its report to Ayub Khan on May 6, 1961, which was approved by his Cabinet in January 1962. Finally, the General promulgated his constitution for Pakistan through radio broadcast on March 1, 1962.
- 17 The politicians included Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, Nurul Amin, Abu Hossain Sarkar, Aatur Rahman Khan, Mahmud Ali, Sheikh

- Mujibur Rahman, Yusuf Ali Chowdhury, Syed Azizul Huq and Pir Mohosenuddin.
- 18 The *Civil and Military Gazette* is cited in Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, pp. 108-109
 - 19 Moulana Bhasani founded the Krishak Samity, following a two-day conference of the peasants of the East Pakistan at the Phulchari Ghat of the Rangpur district on January 4, 1958. Earlier, on January 2 and 3, some peasant leaders and leftwing politicians debated and discussed the problems of and solutions to the 'peasantry and peasants' of the East and finally resolved that the problems of the people of East Pakistan, 86 per cent of which were peasants, would never be solved unless the peasants develop their own organisations to fight against the feudal land-relations as well as capitalist exploitations of the peasantry, on the one hand, and take part in the political movements for democracy, on the other.
 - 20 Amjad Hossain, *Bangladeher Krishak Andolaner Itihas*, Volume -1, p. 179
 - 21 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Karagarer Rojnamcha*, p. 180
 - 22 Mahbub Ullah, *Shater Dashaker Chhatra Rajniti O Anyanya Prasanga*, p. 11
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Brahma belief system came into official existence as monotheistic reformist movement of the Hindu religion with the formation of the *Brahmo Samaj* in the Kolkata city of India in 1828. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) was the founder of the movement while Debendranath Thakur (1817–1905), father of Rabindranath Thakur, carried forward the movement after the death of Ram Mohan Roy.
 - 25 Syeed-Ur Rahman, *Bangladesher Sanskritik Andolan: 1940–1982*, p. 48
 - 26 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment*, p. 253.
 - 27 Tofazzal Hossain (Manik Mia), *Pakistani Rajniti Beesh Bachhar*, p. 179
 - 28 The academics included, among others, Dr A. Sadeque, Dr Nurul Islam, Dr Habibur Rahman, Dr Anisur Rahman, Dr Akhlakur Rahman, Dr Mosharraf Hossain, Abdur Razzaq, Prof M.N. Huda, Professor A.F.A. Hossain and Rehman Sobhan.
 - 29 Tofazzal Hossain (Manik Mia), *Pakistani Rajniti Beesh Bachhar*, p. 179
 - 30 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment*, pp. 254-255.
 31. Immediately after the birth of Pakistan in August 1947, the West-based Muslim League government of Pakistan officially resolved to adopt Urdu, mother language of a small ruling coterie, to be the 'state language' of country, ignoring Bangla, mother language of the

East-based majority population of Pakistan. The politically conscious sections of the East, particularly its democratically oriented sections of the Bengali intellectuals and the student community, reacted sharply and resorted to protests against the irrational resolve, demanding that Bangla be also made a state language, alongside Urdu. The protests turned into a vigorous movement, when Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding Governor General, publicly announced the undemocratic decision during his visit to East Pakistan in March 1948. In the wake of mass protests, the West kept the resolve in abeyance for some years only to revive the project in February 1952. This time, again, the East in general and its student community in particular, launched a massive political movement across the East for recognizing Bangla to be a 'state language' while the Muslim League administration took multidimensional repressive measures to suppress the movement. In the process, police fired shots at the language movement protesters in the Dhaka University premises on February 21, 1952, killing at least four protesters on the spot. Since then, the people of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, remember with great honour the martyred of the language movement by observing Shaheed Dibas on February 21 every year.

- 32 The decision was made in the midnight of January 31, 1962 at the Madhu's Canteen of Dhaka University. The Student Union was represented by Mohammad Farhad, Badrul Huq and Haider Akbar Khan Rano while Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni, Serajul Alam Khan and Abdur Razzak represented the Student League.
- 33 President General Ayub Khan announced an 11-member Education Commission, headed by Prof S M Sharif, a former teacher at the University of Aligarh, on December 30, 1958 to 'reform' Pakistan's education system. The Commission started its activities in January 1959 and submitted its 'interim report' on August 1959 to the President. The Ministry of Education published the report in late 1961 while the progressive student bodies of East Pakistan became aware of the anti-people content of the report in early 1962.
- 34 The Report of the Sharif Commission is cited in Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas*, p. 249.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 248
- 36 Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas*, p.253
- 37 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 59
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 60
- 39 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p.111

- 40 Harun-or-Rashid, *Chhay-Dafar Panchas Bachar*, p. 32
- 41 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, pp. 280, 282
- 42 The demand for East Bengal's full autonomy, based on the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution adopted in 1940, was first articulated in some details by the 'grand national convention' of the East's democratically oriented political parties and socio-cultural organisations and the progressive sections of the intelligentsia in 1950 and then it was further specified in the 'election manifesto' of the United Front, composed primarily of the Awami Muslim League and Krishak Sramik Party, albeit with the backstage cooperation from the Communist Party, in 1954.
- 43 For details of the NAP's 14-Point programme, see Hassan Hafizur Rahman (ed.) *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddha: Dalilpatra*, (Henceforth BSJD) Volume-2, pp. 257-266
- 44 For the full text of the Six-Point programme, see BSJD, Volume-2, pp. 267-276
- 45 Kamruddin Ahmad, *A Socio Political History of Bengal and the Birth of Bangladesh*, p. 159.
- 46 BSJD, Volume-2, p.286
- 47 Much before he was freed from the 'conspiracy case' in the face of people's movement, the Sheikh had admittedly managed from jail to send a 'personal letter' to Ayub Khan, through a couple of West Pakistani army officers, pleading himself not guilty of being involved in any such conspiracy. (See Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Karagarer Rojnamcha*, p. 260) Subsequently, General Ayub intervened in the process of the case preparation and following 'Ayub's intervention' on April 6, 1968, 'Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name was deleted from the list of the accused', which was published in the form of a government 'press note' the next day. But, 'a few days later another press note was issued adding the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' as the 'main conspirator' on the insistence of Yahya Khan's 'legal advisers' 'for the success of the case'. (See Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, pp. 421, 422) Then, the government began the trial of the sedition case in a special tribunal set up inside the Dhaka cantonment on June 19, 1968.
- 48 For the full text of the government 'press note', see BSJD, Volume-2, p. 277
- 49 Harun-or-Rashid, *Chhay-Dafar Panchas Bachar*, p.48
- 50 Nooh-Ul- Alam Lenin, *Bangladesh Awami League: Sankhipta Etihash O Nirbachita Dalil*, p. 57
- 51 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 284

154 Deposing of a Dictator

- 52 The report was published in the Dhaka-based daily newspapers including Dainik Pakistan and Dainik Sangbad on June 23, 1967.
- 53 Those who signed the statement included, among others, Dr. Kazi Motahar Hossain, Dr. Qudrat-i-Khuda, Dr. Abdul Hye, Muneir Chowdhury, Dr. Ahmed Sharif, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, Dr. Mohammad Maniruzzaman, Dr. Rafiqul Islam and Dr. Anisuzzaman, Zainul Abedin, Shahidullah Kaiser, Begum Sufia Kamal, Sikandar Abu Zafar and Hassan Hafizur Rahman. See BSJD, Volume-2, p. 288
- 54 Ibid. Later, a day after his release from prison following the withdrawal of the Agartala Conspiracy case on February 22, 1969, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would also ‘strongly criticise the government policy’ of imposing restrictions on broadcasting Thakur’s songs, saying that ‘Rabinndranath [Thakur] is the poet of the people of Bengal’ and demand that the ‘Radio authorities must broadcast his songs’. See BSJD, Volume-2, p. 440)
- 55 Mohammad Ayub Khan, *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography*, p.187
- 56 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment*, p. 247
- 57 For example, the leftwing Purba Bangla Sramik Andolan, led by Siraj Shikder, identified the ‘[West] Pakistani colonialism’ to be the ‘principal enemy’ of the people of the East and issued a call for working towards a ‘national democratic revolution’ in January 1967 to free Bangladesh from the neo-colonialist chains of Pakistan through armed struggle. For the details of the thesis, see BSJD, Volume-2, pp. 382-396
- 58 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahbub_ul_Haq
- 59 Harun-or-Rashid, *Chhai-Dafar Panchash Bachhar*, p. 30

Breaking the silence aloud: Legitimate anger bursts into the streets

- 1 For the full text of Moulana’s speech, see Hassan Hafizur Rahman (ed.) BSJD, Volume-2, pp. 301-302
- 2 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, pp. 16-17
- 3 Ibid., p. 23

- 4 Sirajul Islam and others (eds.), *Banglapedia*, Volume-6, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003, Entry: Mass Upsurge 1969, pp. 432-434
- 5 Abdul Halim, “Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas: 1966–1969” in Professor Salahuddin Ahmed and others (ed.), *Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas : 1947–1971*, p.164
- 6 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periey*, p.171
- 7 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan*, p.13
- 8 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People’s Power*, p.156
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.157
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.161
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.164
- 13 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan’s First Military Ruler*, p. 434.
- 14 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People’s Power*, p. 171
- 15 Dr. Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas: 1830 Theke 1971*, p. 331
- 16 Bahadur Shah Park, formerly Queen Victoria Park, is located in the old part of the Dhaka city, where the British colonisers publicly executed by hanging some defeated soldiers of the first Indian war of independence in 1857. The park was set up and a monument was erected there after the name of Queen Victoria at the initiative of Nawab Khawaja Abdul Ghani in 1858 on the occasion of her accession to the British throne that year. The park was renamed Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last independent Indian emperor who was killed by the colonialist Britishers in 1857, after the independence of the sub-continent in 1947.
- 17 Daily Ittefaq, Dhaka, November 20, 1968

Moulana rouses the masses: An uprising in the making

- 1 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 397
- 2 Moulana Bhasani was president of all the National Awami Party, Krishak Samity and the Sramik Federation while Mohammad Toaha, Abdul Huq and Sirajul Hossen Khan, the secretaries general of the organisations respectively, also addressed the rally.
- 3 Amjad Hossain, *Bangladesher Krishak Andolaner Itihas*, Volume –I,

- p. 306.
- 4 Mahfuz Ullah, *Abhuyathaner Unasattar*, p. 33
- 5 Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, pp. 314-315
- 6 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 160
- 7 Holiday, Dhaka, December 8, 1968. Referring to the Moulana's 'corrective measures', the Holiday hinted at the media allegation about Moulana's 'inaction against the repressive Ayub regime' for a few years due to the military regime's efforts to develop better foreign relation with the erstwhile socialist China. The Moulana had been aware of the allegation while he had once, on his return from a long China visit in December 1963, expressed angry reaction to the misreporting about him. The Moulana, while responding to public reception accorded to him in Dhaka on December 2, said that 'some newspapers have recently branding me to be Ayub's loyal friend' and 'some Chittagong-based journalists who have not at all met me have been writing fictitious stories about me'. See Amjad Hossain, *Bangladesher Krishak Andolaner Itihas*, Volume -1, p. 201
- 8 Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, p. 315
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Khandakar Mehbub Alam, *Awami League O Bangladesh*, Volume -1, p. 97
- 11 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 401
- 12 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 175
- 13 Ibid., p. 403
- 14 Amjad Hossain, *Bangladesher Krishak Andolaner Itihas*, Volume -I, p. 307
- 15 Mahfuz Ullah, *Abhuyathaner Unasattar*, p. 47
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The left leaders who were active in peasant movements include Hatem Ali Khan, Mohammad Sultan, Mani Singh, Abdul Huq, Abdul Matin, Amulya Lahiri, Subodh Lahiri, Haji Mohammad Danesh, Satyen Sen, Jiten Ghosh, Munshi Modasser Ali, Nogendranath Sarkar, Mohammad Toaha Alauddin Ahmed, Anima Singh and Majirunnesa.
- 18 Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, p. 263
- 19 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 408; Amjad Hossain, *Bangladesher Krishak Andolaner Itihas*, Volume-I, p. 309
- 20 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 168
- 21 Amjad Hossain, *Bangladesher Sramik Andoloner Itihas*, pp. 466-467
- 22 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 172
- 23 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasotturer Gana-abhuyatthan*, p.107; Haider

- Akbar Khan Rono, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 168
- 24 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasotturer Gana-obhuyathan*, p. 107
- 25 Amjad Hossen, *Bangladesher Sramik Andolaner Itihas*, p. 99
- 26 Mohammad Toaha, *Smritikatha*, p. 246
- 27 Ibid., p. 248
- 28 Shamshuddin Peyara, *Ami Sirajul Alam Khan: Ekti Rajnoitik Jeebonalekhyo*, pp. 126-127
- 29 Ibid., p. 128

Students also rise in the East: Dawns the magnificent mass uprising

- 1 The member organizations of the Students Action Committee (SAC) included the Student League led by Abdur Rauf and Khaled Mohammad Ali, the Students Union led by Saifuddin Ahmed Manik and Shamshuddoha, the Students Union led by Mustafa Jamal Haider and Mahabub Ullah and a faction of the National Student Front led by Ibrahim Khalil and Fakhru Islam Munshi. The Student League was associated with the Awami League, the two factions of the Students Union were associated with the pro-Moscow and pro-Peking factions of the Communist Party while the National Student Front was associated with the Sabur Khan-led faction of the Muslim League.
- 2 For details of the 11-Point programme, see BSJD, Volume -2, pp. 409-412
- 3 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment*, pp. 281-282
- 4 The DAC components included the East Pakistan Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, another faction of the Awami League led by the West-based Nawabjada Nasrullah Khan which was opposed to the Sheikh's Six-point programme for autonomy, the pro-Moscow National Awami Party led by the West's Wali Khan and the East based Muzaffar Ahmed, the Pakistan Muslim League (Council) led by the West based Mamtaz Doulatana, the National Democratic Front led by the East-based Nurul Amin, the Jamaat-e-Islami led by the West-based Abu A'la Maududi, the Nezam-e-Islami led by Chaudhry Mohammad Ali of West Pakistan and Jamaate Olama-e-Islam led by the West-based Mufti Mahmud.

- 5 For details, see BSJD, Volume-2, pp. 404-405
- 6 Mahfuz Ullah, *Abhuyathaner Unasattar*, p.48
- 7 Ibid, p. 51
- 8 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 10
- 9 Mahfuz Ullah, *Abhuyathaner Unasattar*, p. 52
- 10 Selina Hossain, *Unasatturer Ganoandolan*, p. 49
- 11 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 40
- 12 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p.170
- 13 আমাদের দুর্বলতা, ভীর্ণতা কলুষ আর লজ্জা/সমস্ত দিয়েছে ঢেকে একখণ্ড বস্ত্র মানবিক;/
আসাদের শার্ট আজ আমাদের প্রাণের পতাকা।
- 14 এ লাশ আমরা রাখবো কোথায়?/তেমন যোগ্য সমাধি কই?/মৃত্তিকা বল, পর্বত বল, অথবা
সুনীল সাগরজল/সব কিছু ছেঁদো, তুচ্ছ শুধুই
- 15 ট্রাক! ট্রাক! ট্রাক!
শ্রমিকেরা ট্রাক আসছে
দুয়োর বেঁধে রাখ।
কেন বাঁধবো দোর জানালা
তুলবো কেন খিল?
আসাদ গেছে মিছিল নিয়ে
ফিরবে সে মিছিল।
ট্রাক! ট্রাক! ট্রাক!
ট্রাকের মুখে আগুন দিতে
মতিয়ুরকে ডাক।
কোথায় পাবো মতিয়ুরকে
ঘুমিয়ে আছে সে!
তোরাই তবে সোনামানিক
আগুন জ্বলে দে!
- 16 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan*, p.45
- 17 M. Shamsuddoha, *Itihaser Alpa Katha*, p. 78
- 18 Deben Shikder, *Baish Bacharer Gopan Jiban: Galper Cheyeo Romanchakar*, pp. 190-191
- 19 Kazi Aref Ahmed, *Bangalir Jatiya Rashtra*, (ed.) Sqn Ldr (Retd.) Ahsanullah, International Historical Network, Dhaka, 2014, p. 144. The Mao Research Centre was transformed to the East Bengal Workers Movement in January 1970 and finally renamed to be Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party in the midst of the country's liberation war in June 1971.
- 20 A S M Abdur Rab, "Muktijuddher Nucleolus" in Mohiuddin Ahmad (ed.), *Amader Ekattar*, p. 6
- 21 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 171
- 22 Biren Shome, *Bangladesher Swadhinata Sangrame Shilpisamaj*, p. 18

- 23 Mahbub Ullah, *Shater Dashaker Chhatra Rajniti O Anyanya Prasanga*, p. 36
- 24 M. Shamsuddoha, *Itihaser Alpa Katha*, p. 78
- 25 Mahbub Ullah, *Shater Dashaker Chhatra Rajniti O Anyanya Prasanga*, p. 36
- 26 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan* p. 53
- 27 [Weekly] Holiday, Dhaka, January 28, 1969
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 171
- 30 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan* pp. 48-49
- 31 Dr. Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas: 1830 Theke 1971*, p. 374
- 32 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 60
- 33 Tofail Ahmed, "Je Shapath Niyechhilam Amra," *The Bangladesh Pratidin*, Dhaka, February 9, 2017
- 34 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 447

Sheikh's secret message to the Moulana: Moulana's roaring response to free the Sheikh

1. For details, see Dr. Taj Hasmi, "The 1969 mass uprising in East Pakistan, as I saw it", *South Asia Journal*, January 24, 2020. <http://southasiajournal.net/the-1969-mass-uprising-in-east-pakistan-as-i-saw-it/>, accessed on January 24, 2020.
- 2 S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, p.151
- 3 A B M Musa, *Amar Bela Je Jay*, pp. 192
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Faiz Ahmod, *Madhyarater Ashwarohi* (Single Volume), p. 317
- 6 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 451
- 7 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 177
- 8 Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, p. 321
- 9 A B M Musa, *Amar Bela Je Jay*, p. 192.
- 10 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p.452
- 11 Faiz Ahmod, *Madhyrater Ashwarohi* (Single Volume), p. 318
- 12 Abul Maal A. Muhit, *History of Bangladesh: A Subcontinental Civilisation*, p. 207

- 13 M. Shamsuddoha, *Itihaser Alpa Kotha*, p. 87
- 14 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, pp. 453
- 15 Cragge Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966–1972*, p. 300
- 16 Sharmin Ahmad, *Tajuddin Ahmad: Neta O Pita*, p. 42
- 17 M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, pp. 50-51
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Selina Hossain, *Unasatturer Gana-andolan*, p. 55
- 20 M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, p. 51. Also, Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 183
- 21 Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, *Rajnitir Tin Kal*, p. 95. Also, Tofail Ahmed, *Unasatturer Gono Andolon O Bangabandhu*, p. 26
22. Santosh Gupta, “Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas: 1969–March 1971” in Professor Salahuddin Ahmed and others (ed.), *Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas : 1947–1971*, p. 177
- 23 Santosh Gupta, “Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas: 1969–March 1971” in Professor Salahuddin Ahmed and others (ed.), *Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas : 1947–1971*, p. 177
- 24 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, pp. 180-181
- 25 Ibid., p.181
- 26 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 453
- 27 Ibid. The two governors were eventually replaced with Dr. M. N. Huda and Yusuf Harun respectively on March 21 but without the intended results.
- 28 Ibid., p. 454
- 29 Biren Shome, *Bangladesher Swadhinota Sangrame Shilpisamaj*, pp. 47-48
- 30 See footnote 19 in Altaf Gauhar *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 453
- 31 Tofail Ahmed, *Unosatturer Gana Andolon O Bangabandhu*, p. 28
- 32 Ibid., p. 29
- 33 Mahfuz Ullah (ed.), *Purba Pakistan Chatra Union: Gouraber Dinlipi, Adorn Publication*, Dhaka, 2012, p.745
- 34 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 72
- 35 M A Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, p.53
- 36 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 455
- 37 Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, *Rajnitir Tin Kal*, p. 91

- 38 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, Tarafder Prokashani, Dhaka, 2005, pp. 184-185. M. A. Wajed Miah, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's son-in-law, however, writes that the Sheikh 'went to seek Moulana Bhasani's blessings' a day after he had been released from jail. Wajed Miah writes that the Sheikh went to Bhasani's place directly from the Ramna Racecourse ground, where the former was accorded a public reception by the Students Action Committee in the February 23 afternoon. See M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, p. 54
- 39 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 212
- 40 Santosh Gupta, "Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas: 1969–March 1971" in Professor Salahuddin Ahmed and others (ed.), *Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas : 1947–1971*, p. 178
- 41 Tofail Ahmed, *Unasatturer Gona Andolan O Bangabandhu*, pp. 32-33
- 42 M. Shamsuddoha, *Itihaser Alpa Katha*, pp. 90-91
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 91
- 44 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 439
- 45 The West Pakistan based Governor-General of Pakistan, Malik Ghulam Muhammad, unilaterally promulgated a couple of ordinances in June 1955, seeking to unite all the four separate provinces of West Pakistan into 'One Unit' on the one hand and provide 'Parity' of representations between East and West Pakistan in the Constitutive Assembly, although 42 million out of Pakistan's total population of 75 million at the time belonged to East Pakistan. Under the treacherous 'Parity' scheme, the Governor-General issued an order for constituting an 80-member body, having 40 members each from East and West Pakistan, to hold a Convention for formulating the Constitution of Pakistan. The ordinance eventually resulted in the signing of the politically treacherous Murree Pact between the dominant political forces of East and West Pakistan at the time in July 1955. The agreement went against the vital political, economic and administrative interests of the people of the East.
- 46 Ataur Rahman Khan, *Swairacharer Dash Bachhar*, p. 429

The abortive roundtable: Sheikh's return to East disappointed

- 1 Santosh Gupta, "Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas: 1969 – March 1971" in Professor Salahuddin Ahmed and others (ed.), *Bangladesher Mukti Sangramer Itihas : 1947–1971*, p. 187
- 2 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, Jatiya Sahitya Prakasani, Dhaka, 1989, p. 50
- 3 Ibid., p. 102
- 4 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 434
- 5 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan*, p. 87
- 6 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 212
- 7 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan*, p. 52
- 8 Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, p. 321
- 9 Haider Akbar Khan Rono, *Shatabdi Perieye*, p. 165
- 10 M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, p. 54
- 11 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 456
- 12 Cragge Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966-1972*, p. 302
- 13 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p.86
- 14 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech delivered at the Roundtable Conference at Rawalpindi on March 10, 1969. For details, see BSJD, Volume-2, pp. 443-448
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 89
- 17 BSJD, Volume-2, p. 449
- 18 The Lahore Resolution adopted by the All-India Muslim League on March 23, 1940, which was provided the basis for the Pakistan movement, said that 'the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute 'Independent States' in which constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign'. For the full text of the Lahore Resolution, see BSJD, Volume-1, pp. 2-3
- 19 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, p. 65
- 20 M. Azizul Jalil, "In Retrospect: Glimpses from the Past: Conversation with Two Leaders", the Star, the weekend magazine of The Daily Star, Dhaka, October 2, 2004

- 21 S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, p.159.
- 22 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Perieye*, p.193
- 23 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 464
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 457
- 25 M. A. Wajed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibke Ghire Kichu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, p. 56
- 26 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Perieye*, p.187
- 27 Selina Hossain, *Unasatturer Ganoandolon*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1985, p. 57
- 28 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 95
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 114
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 86

Deposing of the dictator

- 1 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Gana-abhyutthan*, p. 86
- 2 *Ibid.*,p. 77
- 3 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p.191
- 4 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment*, pp. 281-282
- 5 Khalid B. Sayeed, *Politics in Pakistan: The Nature and Direction of Change*, p. 147
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148
- 7 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 458
- 8 Crag Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966-1972*, p. 308
- 9 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 473
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 471
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 457. Also see Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment*, SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2016, p. 284
- 12 For the full text of General Ayub Khan's letter to General Yahya Khan, see Crag Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966-1972*, Appendix-1, pp. 545-546
- 13 President Ayub Khan wrote a letter on the same day—March 24, 1969—to Justice Abdul Jabbar Khan, Speaker of the National Assembly of

Pakistan, informing the latter ‘the circumstances’, under which he ‘had to decide to relinquish office in the interest of unity and security of the country’ and hand over power to the ‘Defence forces’, who ‘alone are [...] in a position to control the situation and put the country back on the road to civil and constitutional life’. Ayub also sent to Justice Khan a ‘copy of the letter’ that he had written to General Yahya.

- 14 For the full text of General Ayub Khan’s letter to General Yahya Khan, see Cragge Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966-1972*, Appendix-2, pp. 547-548
- 15 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan’s First Military Ruler*, p. 489
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 486-487
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 489-490
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 490
- 10 Arati Datta, *Je Atit Bhola Jai Na*, Batighar, Chattagram, 2019, pp. 195 -196
- 20 The fact sheet, prepared on the basis of newspaper reports of the time, is cited in Dr. Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andolaner Itihas: 1830 Theke 1971*, p. 380

Epilogue:

Renewal of the old order, and thereafter

- 1 The pro-Peking Communist Party continued to break into factions since 1968 resulting in the existence of half a dozen groups in 1971. The factions are: East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) led by Shukhendu Dastidar, Mohammad Toaha and Abdul Huq; Communist Party of East Bengal led by Deben Shikder, Abul Bashar, Abdul Matin and Alauddin Ahmed; Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party led by Siraj Shikder, Co-ordination Council of the Revolutionaries of East Bengal led by Kazi Zafar Ahmad and Haider Akbar Khan Rano, East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) led by Abdul Huq and Communist Party of East Bengal led by Abdul Matin and Alauddin Ahmed.
- 2 Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People’s Power*, pp. 215-216
- 3 Arshad Sami Khan sj, *Three Presidents and an Aide: Life, Power & Politics*, p. 8
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 9

- 5 Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler*, p. 482
- 6 Cragge Baxter (ed.), *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan: 1966-1972*, p. 508
- 7 Mahfuz Ullah, *Abhuyathaner Unashattar*, p. 97
- 8 Nurul Islam Nahid is cited in Dr. Mohammad Abdul Hannan, *Bangladesher Chhatra Andoloner Itihas: 1830 Theke 1971*, p. 382
- 9 Haider Akbar Khan Rano, *Shatabdi Periye*, p. 220
- 10 Rehman Sobhan, *Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfillment*, p. 284
- 11 Mohammad Farhad, *Unasatturer Ganaabhyutthan*, pp. 81-82
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.82
- 13 M. Shamsuddoha, *Itihaser Alpa Kotha*, p. 102
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 103-106
- 15 See Major General Moinul Hossain Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, *Ek General-er Nirab Swakhya : Swadhinatar Pratham Dashak*, pp.102-103. General Choudhury, a Captain of Pakistan Army in 1969, heard the story from Major General Khadim Hossaion Raja, then General Officer Commanding (GOC) of East Pakistan, who had witnessed the talks between Yahya Khan and Moulana Bhasani. Chowdhury was the GOC's Aide de camp those days.
- 16 Haidar Akbar Khan Rano, *Uttal Shater Dashak* in Serajul Islam Chowdhury (ed.), *Natun Diganta*, April-June issue, Dhaka, 2016, p. 165
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 166
- 19 Syed Irfanul Bari (ed.), *Bhasani Samipe Nibedan Iti: Moulana Bhasanike Lekha Chithipatra: 1969-1976*, Footnote, p. 89
- 20 Arati Datta, *Je Atit Bhola Jai Na*, p. 196
- 21 Interview of A K Khandaker in Dr. M A Hasan, *Ekatturer Meghe Dhaka Itihas*, p. 296

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