Government-Opposition Relations in Pakistan: Divergent Perceptions on Nation-building during the Early Years∗

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Abstract: Government-Opposition relations is an important area of study to understand the political development in any country but in Pakistan it has not yet caught the attention of historians and writers. Most of the scholars are focusing on the behavior of government or political parties, which gives only a partial picture of the real situation. Both government and opposition as contenders of power play a vital role in shaping the behavior of each other. Opposition is an integral part of democracy. It is government-in-waiting. In fact, If there is no opposition there is no democracy. To study the democratic instability in Pakistan, besides studying the important variables such as bureaucracy, military, government, and external forces, we should also study the role of opposition in this regard.

The early years are most important in the history of Pakistan as it is considered the formative phase, which had left deep impact on the ensuing years. Therefore, in this paper, the author has focused on the problems and issues in post-independence Pakistan and the approach of government and opposition towards their solution. Both had divergent perceptions and consequently, divergent solutions. The opposition’s approach was rejected and opposition’s viewpoint was not accommodated. If the government had accepted opposition’s point of view and accommodated accordingly the history could have been different.

After independence the most important task before the new country was nation-building. Originally nation-building
referred to the efforts of newly-independent nations, notably the nations of Asia, to mould what had been colonial territories, carved up by colonial powers without regard to ethnic or other boundaries, into viable and coherent national entities. Nation-building included the creation of superficial national paraphernalia such as flags, anthems, national days, national stadiums, national airlines, and national languages. At a deeper level, national identity needed to be deliberately constructed by molding different groups into a nation, especially since colonialism had used divide and rule tactics to maintain its domination. More recently, nation-building has come to be used in a completely different context, with reference to the use of armed force in the aftermath of a conflict to underpin an enduring transition to democracy.

The Muslim League being the nationalist party was the natural heir to form the government in Pakistan after independence. It ruled as the dominant party at the center as well as in the provinces till 1954. After the elections in Bengal in 1954 it had to share power with its opposition parties at the center till September 1956 and for a brief period of I.I. Chundrigar government of six months in 1957. Afterwards it went into Opposition at the center. The Awami League who was the major Opposition party during the Muslim League government remained in power in the center From September 12, 1956 to October 18, 1957. Republican Party was sharing power from 1957 till the imposition of Martial Law in the country.

In the early years, mainly the opposition originated from three sources. Some opposition parties had roots in pre-independence politics. Some were organized after independence. But most of them were the dissident factions of the Muslim League. Pakistan National Congress, Communist Party, Khudai Khidmatgar, Jamaat-i-Islam-i-Pakistan, Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam, Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam represent the first source. Pakistan People’s Party, Krishak Saramik Party, Khilafat-i-Rabbani Party, Awami Muslim League, Nizam-i-Islam Party, Pakistan National Party, National Awami Party emerged after independence. Muslim League dissident factions Jinnah Muslim League of
Mamdot, Awami Muslim League of Pir Manki, Awami Muslim League of Bhashani disintegrated from Muslim League and set up Opposition parties.

On the whole the Opposition was fragmented into religious parties such as Jamat-i-Islami-Pakistan, Jamiat-Ulama-i-Islam, Jamiat-Ulama-i-Pakistan, Majlis-i-Ahrarh-i-Islam and Nizami-i-Islam, secular parties such as Awami League, leftist parties such as Communist party, Pakistan National Party later on National Awami Party, and regional parties such as United Front, Khudai Khidmatgars and Sindh Awami Mahaz etc. These parties cannot be grouped into clear-cut categories as the parties had over-lapping ideologies and programs.

Both the Muslim League government and the Opposition had divergent perception of realities at that time. The government’s policy was influenced and shaped by the internal and external security threat and economic viability of the state. Consequently, government focused on to develop a strong army to combat external threat and a strong bureaucracy to eradicate the possibility of internal collapse of the state. All the other policies of the government were the result of this perception.

To make the people of the new country into a unified nation the Muslim League government adopted an ideological approach, which was consistent with its pre-independence ideology. It relied on religion to unite the people and solved contemporary problems and issues. The government in order to build morale in the face of unprecedented social and economic dislocations used the religious slogans and exhortations. It used religious nationalism to unite the country behind the Kashmir war despite divergent sectional interests, to encourage private and provincial effort for the rehabilitation of refugees, to promote a tolerant attitude towards the Hindu minority in accordance with Islamic tradition. But this emphasis on religious nationalism excluded the minorities as Muslim League government advocated separate electorates. This created the first cleavage in the process of nation building.
The ideological approach inspired the Muslim League government to adopt assimilationist policy promoting one language and one culture. Quaid-i-Azam’s famous Dacca speech of 1948 defending Urdu confirms this point of view. He said: “…let me make it very clear to you that the State language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one State Language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function.” The first Basic Principles Committee Report (1950) also recommended Urdu as the only state language.

Consequently, Urdu was being imposed on the multi-lingual, multi-cultural society of Pakistan, which created resentment among different ethnic groups particularly from the Bengalis who demanded that Bengali must be declared national language as well.

The government concentrated power at the center. The central government’s control was exercised through the governors, governor’s rule and civil service of Pakistan. The office of the governor was often used as an instrument of centralization. Though under a parliamentary system of government the governor is supposed to be a figurehead. In Pakistan during the 1947-58 period the governor like the governor-general at the center was generally the effective head of the province. Being the center’s appointee, he always protected the center’s interests in the province. Further more the governors were often powerful men who had close party contacts.

Governor’s rule was another instrument of centralization. Article 92A of the government of India Act 1935 later on article 193 in the 1956 constitution enabled the central government to dismiss the provincial government and impose direct central rule on the provinces. It was used against the newly elected government of United Front in 1954. The center could also control individual provincial politicians through the Public and Representatives Offices (Disqualification) Act.
The most effective instrument of centralization was the central services, especially the Civil Service of Pakistan, which manned most of the key decision-making posts in both the center and the provinces. Even when the CSP worked in the provinces, its ultimate coordination lay with the center. The government has to face much resistance for this policy mainly because the ethnic composition of civil-military bureaucracy did not reflect the ethnic diversity of Pakistan and it alienated those not represented in the ranks.

The economic policy of the Muslim League government was centralized and uneven. It increased the disparity between the Eastern and Western wing. Two factors influenced this policy. First West Pakistan got the bulk of migrant entrepreneurs, who played principal role in the industrial development. The second factor was the decision to set up capital in West Pakistan, which led to a higher absorption capacity and higher demand on the government for resources. During the first decade the central government allocated nearly two-thirds of its developmental and non-developmental funds to West Pakistan. The inter-wing disparity in allocation of resources was defended by the central government on economic grounds that there were greater demands in western wing.

The “one-economy” policy of the government failed to take into consideration the essential differences in economic patterns and geographical separation between the two wings. A deliberate and sustained effort was needed on the part of the government for the removal of disparity between the under developed and developing regions. But lack of government effort resulted in the transfer of resources from East to West Pakistan. Through a surplus in international trade and a deficit in inter-wing trade, a sizable amount of East Pakistan’s foreign exchange earning was diverted to the west wing.

The economic policy of the government was a major motivation for a pro-west foreign policy, as economic aid was used for military and civilian purposes. Due to the security of the state, the government entered into western alliances of SEATO
AND CENTO. The input of US military and economic aid significantly strengthened the centralizing processes.

In comparison with the government, the opposition’s approach was based on the pragmatic assessment of the situation. Opposition’s approach was influenced and shaped by the realities of a plural society, geographical distance of one thousand mile between two wings of the country, uneven development of inherited regions of Pakistan and presence of minorities. Consequently, opposition came forward with a different solution.

Opposition’s pragmatic approach guided opposition to advocate secular polity. Opposition’s point of view was that after Pakistan had been achieved, there is no need of communal parties. In order to build a Pakistani nation Muslim League must open its doors for all communities. Many leaders appealed to the Muslim League to open its membership to all the communities of the country by declaring it a non-communal party in order to build a unified nation but this proposal was rejected. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and H.S. Shurawardy appealed to start a fresh with non-communal politics. Ghaffar Khan, G. M. Syed, Shurawardy, and Bhashani advocated for non-communal politics and established their own parties on non-communal basis after Muslim League’s refusal to open its doors for the non-Muslims.

Opposition’s demand for non-communal approach in politics paved the way for the demand of joint electorates. In East Bengal Hindu-Muslim relations began to change in a significant way immediately after the establishment of Pakistan. Hindus were no more in the majority and no more exploiting class. During the British Period the Muslims demanded, and got a separate electorate system in order to protect their minority rights. However, the basis of the separate system disappeared with the disappearance of Hindus as the dominant economic and political power. It became necessary to replace it by a system of joint electorates. This demand for joint electorates began to gain ground among the Muslim middle class, students, teachers and politicians who saw no threat from the Hindu voters.
The politics of Opposition parties on mode of electorate was opportunistic. Despite of clear stance on mode of electorate, the Awami Muslim League and some other parties, refrained from including joint electorates in their 21-point program out of fear that such a step would go against their electoral interests. The Awami Muslim League formally launched a campaign for joint electorate in August 1956, through a propaganda leaflet. The leaflet said that the Quaid-i-Azam wanted to build Pakistan State not on communal basis, but on the basis of equal rights for all citizens. For this a joint electorate was a necessary prerequisite. The same leaflet also said that great harm had been done to the country by communalism. So it was politically imperative to get rid of it. Changing the communal denomination of the Awami Muslim League was a condition for its demand for joint electorates. But it could not be affected before the general elections of 1954. Soon after the general elections and the subsequent developments, the issue made its appearance on the political and organizational agenda of the Awami Muslim League.

In the three-day council meeting of the Awami Muslim League beginning on 21 October 1955 held at the Rupmahlal Cinema Hall near Sadarghat in Dhaka, decision of the change in the denomination of the organization was taken, thereby turning it into a non-communal party. The amendment to the organization’s constitution was moved by Shurawardy, “give them (the minorities) the opportunity to realize that you as well as your government are fully with them in their desire to get their due share in every walk of life. Only then you can in fairness claim loyalty from them.” The Council meeting was presided over by Bhashani who said that,

“The proposal that the Awami League should be an organization of the people of all communities had been mooted sometime back; but it was feared so long that if that step was taken before the party had gathered sufficient strength to withstand the onslaughts which might be launched on it, the party might go under. The
Awami League had now grown into a powerful organization and it could not die. It was, therefore, felt that the step, which they had hesitated in taking so long, could now be taken safely.”

Opposition parties wanted integration on the basis of recognition of all the ethnic and cultural differences thereby focusing on evolving a consensus of all the ethno-cultural communities. The Awami League, Communist Party, Krishak Saramik Party, Sindh Awami Mahaz, later on Pakistan National Party and National Awami Party, all advocated recognition of all the major languages as national languages.

A Circular was circulated on 11 February 1952, by the secretariat of the East Bengal organizing committee of the Communist Party. Two points in this part of the circular deserve particular notice. First the people of Pakistan were referred not as belonging to Pakistani nationhood, but as Bengalis, Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, Balochis and so on, which was in complete opposition to the official position regarding nationhood. Whereas the government declared religion as the basis of nationhood, the Communist Party defined nationhood on the basis of language. In other words they substituted linguistic nationalism in place of religious nationalism. The Communist Party was the only party in the language movement who very clearly stated this position. The second important point is their demand for equal right and status for all languages of the peoples of Pakistan belonging to regions, the East and West.

The Opposition was demanding a broad-based political system. This was the reason they challenged the legitimacy of the First Constituent Assembly, which was not truly representative of all the people of the regions in Pakistan. Opposition political parties were persistently demanding the dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly particularly after the Opposition’s victory in the provincial elections 1954 in Bengal.
The ruling Muslim League identified itself with the state. Muslim League being the architect of Pakistan claimed to be natural heir to the state power. After independence, the ruling Muslim League was reluctant to share power with other claimants of power. The result was that the Opposition hardened its stand on various vital political issues, which only put strains on the political system. But after the Opposition parties were inducted in the system through coalition governments from 1955 onwards, these had softened their demands. For instance Shurawardy convinced their supporters that the Constitution of Pakistan 1956 assured 98 percent provincial autonomy to the provinces. He also took stand on Pakistan’s pro-West foreign policy that it is in the best interest of Pakistan. The Hindus, who were in the opposition during the Muslim League rule (1947-54), were included in the coalition governments. This made their opposition moderate on the Islamic provisions of the Constitution. Thus the Constitution of 1956 had their support.

Provincial autonomy was a reaction towards the increasing powers of the center. All the regional parties were demanding provincial autonomy. This was the single most demand that facilitated the task of bringing the opposition forces to one platform. This was a major objective of the People’s party, Sindh Awami Mahaz, and Pakistan National Party. In East Pakistan, Provincial autonomy was a major demand of 21-point manifesto of United Front. This was also instrumental in uniting the autonomists of both wings on the platform of National Awami Party. Opposition from East Pakistan, generally put forward the argument based on geographical and socio-economic differences.

The Opposition wanted to eliminate the disparity among the different regions of Pakistan by a deliberate effort of the government. It wanted that all regions had equal share in services and resources. The opposition from East Pakistan did not prominently figure economic policy of the government in the 21-points election manifesto or pre-1954 constituent assembly debates. But after the 1954, especially after the Awami league became the opposition party in the national assembly in the
1955-56 session, economic disparity became the focal point of controversy between the center and East Pakistan.\textsuperscript{11}

Before independence the Muslims of the majority provinces with the exception of Punjab, had an insignificant representation in government services. In April 1952, the province-wise distribution of top posts\textsuperscript{12} in the central secretariat was as follows:

**Secretaries**
Non-Pakistani Nationals\textsuperscript{2}
- Punjab: 5
- NWFP: 1
- Migrants: 5
- Total: 13

**Joint Secretaries**
Non-Pakistani Nationals\textsuperscript{2}
- Punjab: 7
- East Pakistan: 1
- Migrants: 9
- Total: 19

**Deputy Secretaries**
Non-Pakistani Nationals
- Punjab: 28
- East Pakistan: 4
- NWFP: 2
- Sind: 1
- Migrants: 19
- Total: 59

Bengali representation in the armed forces was even less than the Bengali share in the civil services. The opposition from the East Pakistan and smaller provinces in West Pakistan demanded increase in representation in services.

After independence, when the United Kingdom devalued Pound Sterling India also devalued its currency but Pakistan
maintained the value of its currency. This policy of non-devaluation mainly affected the East Pakistan jute industry as most of the jute was exported to India and India stopped trade with Pakistan. The Pakistan government constituted jute Board to solve the difficulties arising out of this decision. The Opposition parties particularly East Pakistan Awami Muslim League held that the policy of the non-devaluation had been responsible for the subsequent crisis and that it had benefited a few rich at the cost of agriculturists. The Opposition and the provincial Muslim League pressed for the nationalization of the jute. The central government’s indifference led to the incorporation of the issue in the 21-point manifesto of the Opposition’s election program.

The Opposition parties rejected the pro-west foreign policy of the government. It advocated a non-aligned foreign policy. But mainly opposition was in favor of receiving military and economic aid from the West. The left wing opposition organizations such as the Communist Party, the Azad Pakistan Party and the Ganatantri Dal, Pakistan National Party and National Awami Party opposed this policy. But the major opposition group such as United Front remained silent and did not make it an issue in the East Bengal provincial elections of March 1954. The Opposition leader Shurawardy justified the pro-west foreign policy on the floor of the National Assembly when he came into power.

Opposition tried to build national level parties. Initially the opposition parties were organized in particular regions and had regional support base. For instance, in East Pakistan there emerged East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, Krishak Saramik Party, Ganatantri Dal, Khilafat-i-Rabbani Party, Nizam-I-Islam Party, and National Awami Party having no support base in West Pakistan. Likewise, in West Pakistan emerged Azad Pakistan Party, People’s Party, Pakistan National Party, All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League, and Sindh Awami Mahaz with no base in East Pakistan.
Despite the regional opposition political parties, the healthy trend emerged afterwards that the regional parties merged and tried to transform themselves into national parties. For instance, East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was linked with its West Pakistan counterpart to form an All Pakistan Jinnah Awami Muslim League. National Awami Party of East Pakistan with Pakistan National Party of West Pakistan formed an All Pakistan National Awami Party.

This shows that a regional Opposition was growing into a national Opposition increasing its support base at all Pakistan level. This also indicates that an effort was in progress to transcend the regional differences and raise the national issues agreed upon. If the political process was not aborted in 1958, and there would have been general elections, the regional opposition gradually might grow into national opposition.

Due to this difference in the approach of government and opposition, a consensus could not be reached between the two forces. The opposition began to harden its stand on various issues. Particularly the language issue paved the way for the rise of linguistic nationalism in East Pakistan and Sind. The ethno-regional opposition was gradually alienated from the political system when their demands were not accepted and they were also denied any share in power in the system. The establishment considered national parties a threat to their authority and tried to destroy them. Consequently, the regional parties grew and gained strength and power whereas national parties grew weaker and disintegrated. This must be understood that only government cannot achieve national unity but national opposition parties by providing platform to the plural society contribute towards the national unification.
References and Notes

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


6 Ibid., p.307.

7 Ibid., p.308.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p.309.

10 Quoted in Umer, The Emergence of Bangladesh, pp. 196-97.

11 See Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates, Second Assembly, Vol. 1, January 9, 17 (speech by Abul Mansur Ahmad); January 27 (Ataur Rahman Khan); January 28 (Profesor Muzaffar Ahmad).

12 Constituent Assembly (Legislature) Debates, Vol. I, No. 18 (April 5, 1952), pp. 1063-64