

## **Pakistani Leaders' Response to the Challenge of Power Politics by Bengali Separatism**

**Rizwan Ullah Kokab and Mahboob Hussain**

### **Abstract**

One of the important facet of Bengali separatist movement since its origin in 1948 was Bengalis' struggle to share political power. The power politics of Bengalis was one of the challenges for the leadership of Pakistan in terms of separatist movement that succeeded in 1971. This paper examines the political strategies and tactics of Pakistani leaders, which they adopted in response to those of Bengali politicians. The power sharing of Bengalis, popularity of powerful Pakistani elite and their focus on the political power and not the security of Pakistan in face of Bengali separatism have been analysed in this research paper. The documents and secondary books are major sources of research.

### **Bengali Participation in Ruling Leadership**

On the governmental side where participation of the Bengalis could affect the separatist movement to a large extent the leaders until the dissolution of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP) in 1954 did not give Bengalis due and proper share in power. Sometimes power was shared with Bengali leaders but the real power vested with the leaders who were either non-Bengalis or did not actually represent East Pakistan. These leaders did not enjoy popular support. G. W. Choudhury maintains that there was a cabinet and a parliament but the political order in Pakistan could be called an oligarchy under a democratic constitution. It was a modernising oligarchy in which Bengalis had no share. (Choudhury, 1972: 243)

The leaders of Pakistan did not care for the Bengali representation in first CAP, which with seventy-nine members had the majority from East Pakistan with forty-four seats. As a result of the political settlement, Nazimuddin and other Bengali leaders agreed to give about half a dozen more seats to the West Pakistani or refugees leaders thus rendering East Pakistan's representation to a minority in the CAP. This compromise of Nazimuddin damaged his position in the Bengalis and when he was appointed Governor General (GG) it was common talk in East Bengal that he had been rewarded

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for his treachery to the cause of Bengalis. (Mahmood, 1989, p. 18) (Dil, 2000: 76-77) Bengalis were not represented adequately in the committees of Basic Principles Committee (BPC). Of the 25 members of the BPC only 6 were from East Bengal. Further, its subcommittee for Federal and Provincial Constitutions and Distribution of powers (which was to prepare the list or principles upon which the federal structure of Pakistan would be made) had 20 members, of which only 9 were Bengalis. (Islam, 1990:118)

PM Liaquat Ali Khan's decision, agreed unanimously by his Cabinet, to nominate Khawaja Nazimuddin as GG on the death of Jinnah (UKHC, 1948) gave the Bengalis representation in the highest position of Pakistan. The Bengali representative, however, was not ideal choice because he had record of never been able to get elected but always being brought into positions of power from the backdoor. (Dil, 2000:76) Moreover real power remained with PM Liaquat Ali Khan. After his death, Nazimuddin became PM and Ghulam Muhammad GG, an arrangement in which Bengalis, had to indulge in a tussle to hold real power in their hands.

After the dismissal of Nazimuddin, the position of East Pakistan at the centre was sensibly weekend and the scale and nature of East Pakistani representation in the new cabinet was decreased. Though Dr. Malik was retained in the Cabinet no Bengali was immediately appointed to replace Fazlur Rehman. The East Bengal Muslim League were annoyed that they were not consulted about the appointments to the new Cabinet. (UKHC K., 1953) Rounaq Jahan observes that Bengali PM Bogra was captive of the West Pakistan group that provided the main strength of his government. (Jahan, 1972:27) The Bengalis shared the power in his cabinet to such an extent that they could make an effort what was called by US a constitutional coup to diminish the power of the GG, which was countered by GG and his supporter.

After dissolution of first CAP until the resignation of Suhrawardy in 1957 Bengalis had substantial share in government. Second CAP also accorded a greater number of seats to East Bengal. There were 44 members from the eastern wing out of a total of 79 seats. As CAP was dissolved due to the coup of PML Bengali group led by Nazimuddin and Fazlur Rehman, the ruling leaders definitely had to look towards other Bengali political entities that represented real Bengali elements like United Front (UF) and Awami League (AL). Thus participation in the main stream Central politics changed from nominal to substantially real. They also showed the interest in participation and accepted posts in Cabinet of Talent. They both arranged hero's welcome for GG and Mirza when they visited Dhaka after dissolution. (UKHC P. t., 1954)

***Pakistani Leaders' Response to the Challenge of Power Politics by Bengali Separatism***

Despite the accumulation of power in GG, Bengali PM Bogra's Cabinet of Talent comprised the leaders of two most important Bengali factions who could not remain powerless. Ch. Muhammad Ali's appointment violated an established tradition that if the PM was from East Pakistan the GG would be taken from West Pakistan or vice versa. All the twelve Members of Constituent Assembly of the AL, in a statement, stated that it had shaken the confidence (Mahmood, 1989:21) yet a fair representation was given to Bengalis in the cabinet. Chaudhuri Muhammad Ali, realizing this factor and feeling domination of West Pakistan in the cabinet before his taking the charge appointed Hamidul Huq Chowdhury as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a Bengali Hindu as Minister of State for Economic Affairs, which brought the total membership to fourteen, of whom seven were Bengalis. (Maron, 1955:163)

Bengalis in the period of Suhrawardy's premiership enjoyed full power in Centre. (Choudhury, 1972:243) Bengali participation in the Centre was nominal in the period after the resignation of Suhrawardy in 1957. The main weakness of the Noon Cabinet was the unrepresentative character of its East Pakistan components stemming from the decision of the AL not to take office except under Mr. Suhrawardy and from Hamidul Huq Chowdhury's refusal to accept a portfolio other than one selected by him. (IPBA, January 1958) In this period Iskandar Mirza, with a desire of personal rule, used Republican Party and powers of his own office in the intrigues to deprive the Bengalis participation in Central politics.

In East Pakistan government during 1947-1954 Bengali leaders shared limited power. When the governor of the province remained a Punjabi, Firoz Khan Noon the affairs of the province were mainly handled by him while a Bengali Nurul Amin was Chief Minister (CM). Noon had suggested that the constitution might be partially suspended for the purpose of authorising the Governor of East Bengali to certify the budget. (Noon, 1952) Then after the defeat of PML in the provincial elections apparently the UF Ministry was given chance to work. Ghulam Muhammad dismissed the duly-elected UF Government on May 29, 1954; Governor rule was imposed; and the PM Bogra viewed that if the Province was to prosper, the Centre must continue to administer it until such time as confidence is fully restored and its economy established on a firm footing. (IPBA, Confidential Report, July 1954)

Certainly the UF leadership was neither sufficiently responsible nor experienced. The blame lied with the ML leaders for their failure to encourage the formation of a responsible and experienced opposition. This should have been looked upon as national need over and above party interests. (Maron, The Problem of East Pakistan, June 1955) During Governor's Rule the representative government carried on work in some form. The leadership tried

to some extent that the government of East Pakistan should remain in the hands of East Pakistanis, whether just as a show piece. Iskandar Mirza could also be selected because he could claim to be an East Pakistani.

After the dissolution of first CAP, the ruling leaders were intended to provide the Governor of East Bengal with political advisers drawn from the parties comprising the UF: this was a compromise concession extracted by Suhrawardy in return for his agreement not to press for the restoration of parliamentary government in East Bengal until the proper time or condition. (UKHC P. t., 1954) But soon the governor's rule was removed on terms of PM Bogra who preferred Fazlul Haq to Suhrawardy for dealing. (Symon, 1955) In both cases Bengalis could share power in East Pakistan.

### **Tackling the Movement**

Ruling leadership frequently thought the Bengali Agitation only the Communist and Hindu problem. They considered that from the very beginning, the East Pakistan Communist Party (EPCP) rendered assistance in conducting the Language Agitation. (Swadhinta, 1952) While communist strategy to work in side-organisations, in face of ban, spread the communist elements in whole body politic. Moreover other non-communist elements allied to the communists too run the Movement. This could not be understood by the leadership.

In order to tackle the Movement suppression was used on many occasions. The reports of suppression against the political activities of UF before election 1954 can be looked. Nearly 800 political workers belonging to different opposition parties were arrested which added to those detained previously, brought to four figures the number of citizens incarcerated. (Ali, 1996:278) After the imposition of governor's rule the celebrations of martyr day and holding of any public meeting in this connection were correspondingly forbidden. A large number of arrests of the students were made and there was the impression that the authorities did not handle the affairs with any great commonsense. (Fortnightly summary Part 2, 1955 ) Often the demonstrators were baton charged, and leaders were detained under the Public Safety Laws. (Salamat, 1992:116)

### **Popular Support with Leaders**

Despite the Bengali leaders shared power, nominally during 1947-54, really in 1954-57, and marginally till Martial Law the true representation of Bengalis, and not only Bengalis of all people of Pakistan, was rare during 1947-58. Often a smaller group of leaders continued to rule. Often the posts were

***Pakistani Leaders' Response to the Challenge of Power Politics by Bengali Separatism***

changed from one person to the other. Unsuccessful persons seemed to have become the favourites of those in power. (Shahnawaz, 1971:266-67) It was generally rumoured at the time that a group of about eighty people ruled over Pakistan and appointed one another as the Governor-General, cabinet members, and ambassadors. (Dil, 2000:77) Altaf Gauhar decreases even this number to fifty. (Gauhar, 1998:111)

The oligarchic nature of leadership emerged partly because most leaders had no political base. They were Urdu-speakers and had come to the new country as refugees. Even powerful individuals such as Liaquat Ali, I. H. Qureshi and Dr. Mahmud had no political support on the ground, nor did they have constituencies from which they could get themselves re-elected. Faced with hostile provinces they chose to exercise power through the Executive. (Mazari, 2001:53) (Jahan, 1972:24) They were reluctant either to broaden their ranks by including the regional leaders from within Pakistan or to risk an election, for fear of losing power. As the "national" political elite continued to avoid elections, their mandate grew stale and the ranks of the opposition (mainly regional leaders) swelled. (Jahan, 1972:24) Pakistan Muslim League in Bengal had been purged of many of its leaders who had grassroots support after independence. The radical wing of the party led by Abul Hashim had sidelined Nazimuddin before the 1946 elections. With the result that the Dhaka Nawabs did not get election tickets. After independence the more reliable from the Centre's viewpoint, conservative group staged a comeback. The problem was that these largely Urdu speaking elites were out of touch with Bengali opinion (Talbot, 1999).

These lesser men did not have the weight and popular appeal which might have given them the authority and the confidence to lead. (James, 1993, p. 54) No member of the CAP established in 1955 from West Pakistan was representative of the 98 per cent of the population. (Anjum, 1992:36) Nazimuddin was neither an Member Constituent Assembly nor even an ordinary member of the PML at the time he assumed the office of PM. He was the GG and in that capacity, he accepted his own nomination as PM by the 'cabinet' of the assassinated PM, without any reference to the party or the Assembly. (Afzal, 2001:78) He was not the member of provincial assembly and did not have the courage to contest elections from any constituency even after three months of establishment of Pakistan. (Chaudhry, 2005: 35)

The same is true of most of the ministers and State ministers appointed at the first instance from Bengal. They all depended on indirect elections, rather than direct elections. The inclusion of Ghulam Muhammad, a former civil servant and Sir Zafrullah, who, ever since the visit of the Simon Commission in India failed to lend support to the cause of the people, only added insult to the

injury. Some so-called experts who had never any connection with the people were brought into the cabinet. What were definitely absent in the ruling circles were popular representatives. (Ahmad, 1970: 94)

The factor of non-elected nature of the leaders became more sensitive issue in East Pakistan because in contrast to western wing which retained the medieval type of feudalism, in the Eastern wing ownership of land was very much defused among a vast number of small owners. This provided a social background for democratic politics. The large number of big landlords in the first CAP was 27 out of total 79 would not allow the growth of a political system that would divest itself of its power (Anjum, 1992: 34) (Ahmad K. U., 1972: 59) while East Pakistanis went remote from power circle.

The defeat at Tangail showed the writing on the wall to the leaders and they were so frightened that despite there were thirty vacant seats in provincial assembly no elections were held until 1954 instead of March 1951 as was done in the Western Wing. (Ahmad, 1970: 104) (Hussain, 2000: 31) After second language agitation Governor East Pakistan, Noon, suggested to postpone the elections in the province. (Noon, 1952) They went to election 1954 in East Pakistan due to possibility that controlling the electoral machinery, the administration, the police, the ample funds they had good chance to win the election 1954, the possibility which was even shared by impartial commentators (Hampshire, 1954) otherwise they would not take the risk of holding elections. They used undemocratic ways to snub the elected representatives. After the bye-election in Tangail the elected member Shamsul Huq was arrested along with Khondkar Mushtaq and another accomplice. The provincial government filed an election petition against Shamsul Huq that continued up to 1950. (Umar, 2004:96-98) Likewise Governor Rule through section 92-A was used to control the verdict of election 1954.

The defeat in the provincial elections 1954 had assured the ruling leaders of the danger of elections because in provincial elections of 1954 Suhrawardy, Fazlul Huq and Bhashani won with thumping majority while the CM, Nurul Amin, had lost to a young student by 7,000 votes. (Hussain, 2000: 32) The matter was not for Nurul Amin only. He might win the elections as happened in 1970 but the others who were at helm of affairs were dead sure that they could not face the elections. The climax of this reluctance from the elections was the invitation to martial law of 1958. Muhammad Ali, replying in the questionnaire of Constitution Commission, said that Mirza had taken this action because he had come to realize that "however much he might juggle with various political elements, he had little chance of being re-elected after the first general elections." (Khan, 1974: 61-85)

## **Division of Purpose in Leadership**

The leaders, instead of responding the challenge to the integration of country with unity of purpose and ideology among themselves, were divided into factions and the rise of groupings among them reflected into the rise of separatism in the body politic of country. First the divisions in PML came on the surface. In the first session of Council of PML on 19 February 1949, delegates appeared divided in two definite groups; one consisted of East Bengal, NWFP and Balochistan and other that of Punjab. After objection on the procedure of election and loss of election of General Secretary to NWFP candidate Yusuf Khattak, Punjab group refused to take part in further proceedings. Apart from this division between the Punjab-led and Bengali-led groups, British HC recorded, the dispute between States' ML and PML in 1949 was another example of apparent inability of party leaders to sink personal interests in the interests of organisation or the state. (UKHC P. t., OPDOM, No. 14 Part 2, 11 April 1949 and OPDOM No. 10, Part 2DO 142/424 , 1949) Then a wedge was driven between PM Liaquat Ali and Khaliquzzman, the organiser of PML, which destroyed the last vestige of unity – PML.

The central top ruling leadership busied themselves in intrigues motivated by unscrupulous personal ambitions. Right in the days when PML lost bye-election in East Pakistan in 1949 Khawaja Shahabuddin, (Bengali Interior Minister and brother of GG Nazimuddin), Ghulam Muhammad (Finance Minister), Choudhri Khaliquzzman (President PML) and Altaf Hussain (Editor Dawn) involved themselves in a campaign against PM Liaquat. Ghulam Muhammad seemed to identify himself with Nawab Mamdot who had opened front against Governor Punjab, Mudie, and Daultana. Choudhri Khaliquzzman was also actively intriguing against Mudie who was supported by Liaquat. Shahabuddin was supporting Suhrawardy in making a stronghold in refugees at Sindh. Behind all that lay the disquieting outline of a Bengali group formation against Liaquat Ali. (UKHC P. t., OPDOM, No. 19 Part 2, 13 May 1949) Yunas Samad mentions these groupings that Liaquat, supported by Ghulam Mohammad, and Zafrullah Khan, was challenged by the Bengali group. The encounter was led by Khawaja Shahabuddin, backed by the CM of Bengal, Nurul Amin, actively aided by Altaf Hussain, and supported by dissident Punjabi politicians led by the Nawab of Mamdot. (Samad, 1991: 127-28)

The ambitious leaders who had postponed their attempts to gain personal power at the time of death of Jinnah due to thought that appeal of unity in fresh memory of Jinnah could fail them made group against Liaquat Ali in 1949. They put the greatest danger of general breakdown of the administration. They also forgot, what British were feeling, that ultimate result

of their campaign against Liaquat was chaos because none of his possible successors had a wide enough appeal to hold Pakistan together and there was possibility that State broke up into a series of mutually antagonistic factions each fighting for local control. They also did not mind that an East-West split in Pakistan might take place in the result of their groupings.

There was indication of two other groups who had planned to launch a campaign against Liaquat. Two groups were, as Suhrawardy mentioned to the British envoys, one Shariat group comprised of Pir of Manki, Pir of Zakori and Fatima Jinnah and second Progressive consisted of Progressives of Punjab (Iftikharuddin led), Mamdot and company and Karachi based Shahabuddin led group. *In such a situation of power struggle it was quite natural for Suhrawardy, AL leader, to be confident that he would capture East Bengal within six months.* (Olver, 1949)

*These differences might be useful and helpful if they were ideological but this was not the case in most situations.* Mamdot's differences with Mr. Daultana were more personal and his exit from the PML was actuated by no other consideration than his eviction from the seat of authority by a powerful rival. (Ahmad M. , 1959: 159) The aims, ambitions and disabilities of the leaders of Punjab were described by Governor Mudie in the words that

Mamdot is thoroughly discredited...he is lazy, inefficient and a liar and that his main interest in the administration is to obtain possession of evacuee land...Mumtaz Daultana is a person whom everybody distrusts. While raising storm against Mamdot he professes no desire to succeed Mamdot....I have always doubted whether he possesses the moral courage necessary for a Premier (of Punjab) and his refusal to take office when Jinnah practically ordered him to do so confirms this... Firoz Khan Noon ... is considered rather weak and, since his second marriage, rather more of a society man than a serious politician. (Mudie, 1949)

*All of the notable PML leaders indulged in the politics of getting power in their respective limited spheres and areas of influence. Noon and Daultana were limited to Punjab, Qayyum Khan to NWFP, Qazi Isa to Balochistan, Khuhro to Sindh and Nurul Amin, Abul Hashim and Akram Khan to Bengal. They neither enjoyed any influence in other provinces nor were interested and therefore did not plan to get it for the greater cause of the unity and integrity of Pakistan.*

*In consequence of Liaquat Ali's sudden assassination in October 1950 the groupings appeared more dangerously and clearly. Two certain Punjabi and*



*Bengali groups had developed in cabinet when changes in power positions took place.* At that time, according to Yusuf Haroon, Sardar Nishtar, who was considered by many to be the legitimate heir to Liaquat Ali, had already been chosen to become the PM by the PML high command. Nishtar was feared for his independence and forcefulness by the Punjab group, and a conspiracy was quickly entered in to thwart this move. (Mazari, 2001, p. 55) When Nazimuddin decided to step down and become PM, it was rumoured that Sardar Nishtar and others were somewhat put out. (IPBA, Confidential Report, October 1951) *Thus Ghulam Muhammad got a chance to be elevated at the position of GG and Nazimuddin chose Premiership for him.*

The expectations from Nazimuddin, that as PM he would leave portfolio of Defence for Sardar Nishtar, would not stand for presidency of PML and would not retain his brother Shahabuddin as Interior Minister, did not come true. He showed no immediate tendency to placate the Punjabi element. Admittedly Ch. Muhammad Ali was appointed Finance Minister, but the important portfolio of Economic Affairs was taken away from him and bestowed on Mr. Fazlur Rahman, the Commerce Minister. In those circumstances there was real danger of split, both within the Cabinet and in the country as a whole. (IPBA, Confidential Report, October 1951)

Though Khawaja Nazimuddin was held to be an impartial man, yet he came to be advised more and more by a Bengali coterie including Shahabuddin, Fazlur Rahman, Nurul Amin, and Altaf Hussain, editor of Dawn (Banerjee, 1969: 54) but his inability to defend his policies or his supporters from the GG's onslaught so infuriated his own supporters that they conspired unsuccessfully to remove him from office. (Samad, 1991:132) There was a pathological hatred and rivalry between Ghulam Muhammad and Fazlur Rahman. In the cabinet of Liaquat, Ghulam Muhammad had been virtually the leader of Punjabi group and Fazlur Rahman headed the Bengali group. It seemed to Ghulam Muhammad that Fazlur Rahman was the only obstacle to his power and ego. On becoming GG Ghulam Muhammad asked Nazimuddin to remove Fazlur Rahman but Nazimuddin refused. On this Ghulam Muhammad convinced every member of cabinet to resign on the promise of again making him minister. All the members of cabinet resigned when he said Nazimuddin to resign also. (Kamal, 1970:138-39)

Kamruddin views the drama in the result of which first CAP was dissolved as a fight between Ghulam Muhammad and Fazlur Rahman. Nazimuddin was backed by Fazlur Rahman. Fazlur Rahman would not stand Ghulam Muhammad, and with the backing of the majority in the House he thought he could control Ghulam Muhammad who came to the conclusion that East Bengal members should be isolated in the CAP and the lead must be taken by the Punjabi Members who were the disgruntled elements. (Ahmad, 1970: 139)

The differences in the cabinet of Bogra have been mentioned by Mian Zia-ud-Din, a former politician from North Western Frontier Province and ambassador. He called on Dr Khan Sahib when latter was Central Minister in 1955. Both Dr Khan Sahib and Mian Zia-ud-Din went to Iskandar Mirza's (who was interior minister then) house where Iskandar Mirza and Suhrawardy, the Law Minister, both told him not to believe anything which the PM Bogra said. It became clear to him that the most powerful Ministers, Iskandar Mirza and Suhrawardy, did not trust the PM at all. (Zia-ud-Din, 203-04)

One unit scheme symbolises the differences among leaders of the same parties, same provinces, same units and sometimes even in the same person's change of view. On September 15, 1954 Bogra reported to the CAP that he had managed to cross "the last hurdle" in constitution-making; but Noon, speaking after him, sprang a surprise and demanded a zonal sub federation "here and now". Noon and the Punjabi leadership then in power at the centre as well as in Punjab were vehemently condemned by Nazimuddin as unrepresentative and playing power politics with their last minute insistence on the zonal sub federation scheme. Peerzada observed that Noon was, in fact, about the only man in West Pakistan who favoured the idea. (Dawn, 1954 ) (Speech by Noon, 1954)

It is obvious that in the mid of 1958, as Gurmani viewed like many others, that there was no leadership in the country and ministers were unwilling to turn their attention to the problems of day, both because they were too occupied with their personal affairs and because much of their time was wasted in intrigues. Administratively the country was in a mess. (UKHC K. , to Gilbert Laithwaite, CRO London, 1958) The gap of this leadership could be filled in two ways. One was democratic to consult the people in elections and the other was dictatorial to invite army. The former could change the political as well as the ruling leadership but might be useful for the satisfaction of the separatist elements in East Pakistan or anywhere in the country. The latter option was safer for the ruling oligarchy but could lead the country to destruction and separatism. The mistakes in the past were committed by non-elected leaders, future leaders might not do the same as being elected. The ruling oligarchy selected the latter option and made the decision avoiding elections through imposition of Martial Law.

## **Conclusion**

The ruling leaders of Pakistan did not give Bengali political minded people much chance to share the power in central government as well as provincial government. They were not true representatives of the Bengalis but they claimed the power negating the sentiments of Bengalis. The target of the

***Pakistani Leaders' Response to the Challenge of Power Politics by Bengali Separatism***

Pakistani leadership was only to gain power and not the appeasement of separatism and in order to get their target they marginalised the Bengalis in every way. This led to the success of separatism in East Pakistan.

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***Pakistani Leaders' Response to the Challenge of Power Politics by Bengali Separatism***

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***Rizwan Ullah Kokab & Mahboob Hussain***

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