

## The Socio-Political Dynamics of East Pakistan's Partition

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Muhsin Ramazan İşsever

<sup>1</sup> Urdu Department, Istanbul University, Türkiye

E-mail: [muhsinissever89@gmail.com](mailto:muhsinissever89@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The Indian subcontinent, one of the world's most densely populated regions, is home to a multitude of cultures, languages, religions, and ethnic groups. This demographic diversity has profoundly influenced the region's historical development and socio-political structure. The dominance of the British East India Company in the region exerted significant pressure on local administrations and the populace, leading to various resistance movements. By 1947, British control over India had ended, and the Indian people had gained the power to determine their own future. However, Muslims, facing Hindu dominance and inequalities, sought to establish their own state. Discriminatory policies against Muslims, rising Hindu nationalism, and harsh living conditions led to the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan (East and West). East Pakistan was established as a province of Pakistan in 1947. While the people of East Pakistan spoke Bengali, the population of West Pakistan spoke Urdu. The insistence of Pakistan's founding leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, on making Urdu the sole official language in 1948 sparked significant protests in East Pakistan, where Bengali speakers demanded linguistic freedom and rights. Over the years, these protests escalated into violent clashes with the Pakistani army, turning Bengali into a national symbol and deepening the political divide between East and West Pakistan. Despite constituting the majority of Pakistan's population, Bengalis in East Pakistan received a smaller share of the national income. While West Pakistan experienced significant industrialization, East Pakistan lagged behind, with its export products partially financing the industrialization process. The neglect of East Pakistan in socio-economic development and the disproportionate use of its resources for military and industrial purposes in West Pakistan fueled discontent among Bengalis. The geographical separation of East Pakistan from the central government, with India lying in between, further complicated governance. During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, most military forces were deployed to West Pakistan, leaving East Pakistan feeling isolated and vulnerable. The political representation of East Pakistan was dominated by West Pakistani politicians, leading to further alienation. Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won a significant victory in the 1970 general elections, but the refusal of the Pakistani government to transfer power to him intensified calls for independence in East Pakistan. The subsequent military operation in 1971, led by Yahya Khan, aimed to suppress the independence movement but resulted in widespread violence and atrocities, deepening Bengali resentment towards West Pakistan. With Indian support, the Mukti Bahini fought against the Pakistani army, leading to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. Pakistan suffered a major defeat on December 16, 1971, and East Pakistan declared independence as Bangladesh. The separation of East Pakistan, influenced by various political, economic, and cultural factors, highlighted the challenges of maintaining a unified state with diverse identities.

**Keywords:** Indian Subcontinent, East Pakistan, Demographic Diversity, Socio-economic Inequality.

### Introduction

The region of East Bengal (East Pakistan) was colonised by the British in the 17th century and remained under colonial rule until it gained independence in 1947. The region was notable for its advanced agricultural practices, with fertile lands capable of yielding two to three harvests annually. It also served as a hub for cheap labour. However, during both the British and subsequent Pakistani periods of rule, the region was subjected to a lack of investment and suffered from infrastructural deficiencies and economic issues. This neglect resulted in the local population rejecting both the British and the subsequent Pakistani government. During the period of Pakistani administration, factors such as linguistic differences, misunderstandings, and the condescending attitudes of politicians contributed to the region's continued neglect. This situation contributed to the growth of Bengali nationalism and provided the impetus for Indian involvement. An internal conflict subsequently broke out in East Pakistan, resulting in

the Pakistani military forces' capitulation following India's intervention. (Durgun, 2015, s. 98) The war reached its conclusion on 16 December 1971. In 1958, General Muhammad Ayub Khan assumed control of Pakistan through a coup and subsequently governed the country with the support of the military for 11 years. However, upon losing the military's backing, he transferred power to Yahya Khan, who subsequently declared martial law. (Hasan, 1994, s. 108) The results of the 1970 elections were not accepted by politicians in West Pakistan, resulting in the obstruction of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's appointment as Prime Minister. This situation constituted one of the factors that paved the way for the establishment of Bangladesh. (İssever, 2024, s. 136)

The geographical distance between East and West Pakistan, their encirclement by India, and their distinct cultures and languages were significant factors that contributed to the separation of the two regions. Furthermore, the unyielding stances of politicians prompted East Pakistan to declare independence and establish Bangladesh. Prominent political figures who

played a pivotal role in the separation of East and West Pakistan include Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and General Yahya Khan. In 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman presented a six-point demand to the central government of West Pakistan, marking the inception of the independence movement known as the Six Point Movement.(Reza, 2019, ss. 34-35) In the same year, Mujibur Rahman was elected president of the Awami League Party, thereby assuming a prominent role in Bangladesh's trajectory towards independence.

In addition to the political conflicts in East Pakistan, natural disasters such as the Bhola Cyclone in 1970 resulted in the destruction of infrastructure, the loss of approximately three hundred thousand lives, and the central government's inability to adequately respond.(Afroz, Cramb ve Grünbühel, 2018, s. 602) This, in conjunction with the misappropriation of aid funds for the region, served to accelerate the process of separation. The actions of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to maintain his position of authority and Mujibur Rahman's endeavours to assume control resulted in the commencement of the process of East Pakistan's independence. On 22 December 1971, following India's withdrawal from East Bengal and the transfer of the region's administration to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 26 March 1971, the People's Republic of Bangladesh was formally established.(İşsever, 2024, s. 138)

#### **Pakistan's Formative Years Under the Brief Leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah**

Pakistan was established in 1947 and faced numerous challenges from its inception. The massacre of Muslims in India resulted in a significant influx of refugees into Pakistan, further exacerbating existing challenges such as the Jnanagadh problem and the Kashmir dispute. These issues placed considerable strain on the country's administrative and political mechanisms. The protracted process of constitutional making, economic instability and the flight of capital by Hindus served to impede the formation of Pakistan's institutional structure. In his address on 11 August 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah underscored the government's obligation to safeguard the lives and property of its citizens, identifying corruption and bribery as the nation's most pressing concerns. He also highlighted the prevalence of black marketeering as a significant issue.(Qamarul Ahsan, 1984, s. 111) Governor-General Jinnah appointed British bureaucrats to certain provinces, highlighting the inadequacy of the country's administrative cadres. Jinnah led the newly established cabinet and provided guidance in state affairs.(İşsever, 2024, ss. 155-156) Nevertheless, Jinnah's demise introduced further complexities to the organisation of the country's laws and administrative structures, compelling Pakistan to address pressing issues such as the resettlement of refugees and the Kashmir dispute.

Pakistan gained independence on 14 August 1947 under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. However, the newly formed state soon faced numerous political and administrative challenges. Jinnah, who was highly respected as the founder of Pakistan and a representative of the independence aspirations of Indian Muslims, struggled with serious health issues during and after the independence process. Consequently, he assumed the role of Governor-General instead of Prime Minister.(Ahmad, 1998, ss. 229-231) Under Jinnah's leadership, Pakistan's public services and armed forces underwent a period of significant reorganization. Jinnah placed great emphasis on the importance of East Pakistan and the necessity of establishing close relations with the region. However, following his death, Pakistan experienced internal turmoil and political conflicts due to the absence of a strong political leader. This resulted in a series of challenges, including military coups and wars with India. After Jinnah's demise, Pakistan encountered difficulties in establishing a democratic and secular constitution, and the issues between East and West Pakistan remained unresolved.(İşsever, 2024, ss. 161-162) India's involvement in the internal affairs of East Pakistan and its support for separatist movements resulted in the formation of Bangladesh, which had a detrimental impact on Pakistan's political stability.

#### **Administrative Problems**

Bengali Muslims engaged in significant battles against the British and Hindus with the objective of securing the freedom and rights of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. The establishment of the State of Pakistan was a consequence of these struggles. However, Bengalis did not fully achieve the rights they had anticipated in the newly formed state. Proficiency in Urdu was a prerequisite for entry into civil services in Pakistan, while recruitment into the military was limited on the grounds of physical weakness compared to West Pakistanis. Additionally, Bihari migrants and Punjabis were favoured in government offices.(Çodhri, 2014, s. 20) The condescending attitudes of Bihari and Punjabi officials and soldiers towards Bengalis undermined the sense of belonging of Bengalis in East Pakistan to the State of Pakistan. This disdain was rooted in the belief that Bengalis lived in conditions that were perceived as uncivilised and primitive.(Ahmed, 1988, s. 40) The perspective of West Pakistanis and Biharis, which suggested that people of different races could not coexist, was one of the factors contributing to this divide. Aware of the marginalisation of East Pakistanis, the government implemented a series of measures to address this issue. The proportion of East Pakistanis in the military was notably increased. While Bengalis constituted only 1% of the military at the time of Pakistan's inception, this figure rose to 2% by 1958 and 5% by 1967.(Mahmood, 2018, ss. 43-44) These improvements were shaped by Ayub Khan's experiences during his tenure in East

Pakistan. However, Ayub Khan's authoritarian rule in East Pakistan and the actions of Zakir Husain, whom he appointed as governor, overshadowed these developments. Zakir Husain's arrest and torture of opposition leaders contributed to the emergence of factions advocating for Bengali independence.

The prevailing administrative and political instability in East Pakistan gave rise to a heightened level of opposition against the central government, while simultaneously intensifying the people's demands for new reforms. The absence of democratic elections served to exacerbate the existing divide between the populace and the administration. In 1958, Iskander Ali Mirza dissolved the Assembly and declared martial law, and later that same year, Chief of Army Staff Ayub Khan staged a coup and assumed control of the state, thereby intensifying the political turmoil in the country. The appointment of Muhammad Shoaib, who had been brought from the United States, as finance minister served (Naqvi, 2010, s. 35) to further fuel allegations that the coup had been orchestrated by the United States. This political and administrative instability caused unrest among the Bengali population and served to further ignite their aspirations for independence. (İşsever, 2024, s. 143)

### **Military Coups**

Since its inception, Pakistan's border disputes and military engagements with India have underscored the pivotal role of the Pakistan National Army. This situation resulted in increased defence expenditures and indirectly facilitated the rise of military coups by establishing the military as a dominant force. The first military intervention occurred under General Ayub Khan in 1953, with subsequent interventions occurring under the presidency of Iskander Mirza, who declared martial law in 1958. Ayub Khan deposed Iskander Mirza in 1958 and assumed the presidency. While Ayub Khan's administration achieved economic and industrial developments, it failed to quell the unrest in East Pakistan and prevent its drift away from the central government. (İşsever, 2024, s. 165) In 1969, Yahya Khan assumed the role of leader from Ayub Khan, marking the conclusion of the initial military regime and the advent of the subsequent one. This transition was elucidated in the publication of the political party Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan as follows: "Just as the republican movement had achieved its objectives and the parliamentary system was gaining traction, unfortunately, martial law was declared in the country." (Khalid, 1985, s. 125) The military takeover of the country's administration caused unrest among many segments of the Pakistani population, particularly among the people and politicians of East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the State of Bangladesh, expressed this unrest in a speech delivered in Dhaka on March 7, 1971, as follows: "We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to run the government in

Pakistan. In 1958, Ayub Khan imposed Martial Law on our people and enslaved us for ten years. In 1966, during the Six-Point Movement of the people, many young men and women lost their lives." (Afrasiab, 2016, s. 572) The imposition of martial law conveyed a stark and painful message of political and social upheaval in East Pakistan, a development that defied the expectations of the region's inhabitants. Despite the destruction of their republican aspirations, the idea of a republic and freedom remained a powerful force within their hearts and minds, fuelling a desire for an environment where they could express their views. The concept of a republic and freedom, which had previously been a mere thought, now became a flood of emotions. This was a time of great anticipation, as the people awaited the opportunity to reveal their thoughts. Although martial law brought a temporary sense of security and peace, the lack of any investigation into the criminals and state officials involved in the massacres during the movement against Ayub Khan in East Pakistan during Yahya Khan's government saddened and bewildered the people who desired a secure environment. (Khalid, 1985, s. 125) During the tenure of Yahya Khan, the political and military unrest in East Pakistan, coupled with the ongoing conflict with India, gave rise to the East Pakistani movement for independence. In 1971, East Pakistan formally declared its independence as the sovereign state of Bangladesh.

The occurrence of military coups and the imposition of martial law have resulted in the erosion of democratic institutions in Pakistan, leading to a decline in public confidence in the military. Following his election as president in 1971, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto called for the military to refrain from involvement in political affairs and initiated a campaign for democratic reform. (Afrasiab, 2016, s. 20) During Ayub Khan's tenure, economic growth was achieved, yet political instability and unrest in East Pakistan persisted. Under Yahya Khan's leadership, separatist movements in East Pakistan and the war with India resulted in the dissolution of Pakistan. In 1971, Yahya Khan relinquished his authority to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. (İşsever, 2024, s. 172) These events have been regarded as pivotal turning points that have had a profound impact on Pakistan's political stability and democratic development.

### **The Autonomy Demand of Bengali Politicians and Political Tensions in Pakistan**

Politicians from West Pakistan in the central government were apprehensive about Bengali politicians taking control of the state administration and were unwilling to share power with them. As a result, Bengalis were prevented from participating in politics and were excluded from the political arena. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the General Secretary of the Awami League Party, argued that the central government was practising ethnic discrimination

against Bengalis and demanded autonomy for East Pakistan.(İşsever, 2024, ss. 172-173) In 1965, he prepared a six-point autonomy proposal, known as the "Six Points," which outlined the main principles as follows:

1. It is recommended that the federal and parliamentary government structure be elected on the basis of direct and universal adult suffrage.
2. It is recommended that the federal government's responsibilities be limited to matters of defence and foreign affairs, with all other matters being delegated to the provincial administrations.
3. It is recommended that either two separate currencies or a single currency be introduced, with the inclusion of constitutional provisions designed to prevent the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan.
4. The authority to levy taxes and collect revenue should be vested in the federating units.
5. There should be two separate accounts for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings, domestic products should move without customs duties, and the constitution should grant the units the authority to establish trade links with foreign countries.(Şahbaz, 2023, s. 191)

In consequence of this proposal, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and thirty-four Bengalis were incarcerated by Ayub Khan on 8 May 1966, and remained in prison until 22 January 1969.(Ludden, 2011, s. 81) The political differences between East and West Pakistan became an indicator that the relationship between the two wings of the country would no longer be the same. Following Mujibur Rahman's manifesto, the West Pakistani administration accused numerous politicians operating in East Pakistan of engaging in separatist activities and had them arrested. On 12 July 1967, a significant insurrection commenced in the Agartala region of East Pakistan.(Şahbaz, 2023, s. 192) The crises that beset the country resulted in Ayub Khan's resignation on 25 March 1969, which saw Yahya Khan assume the role of military leader. Yahya Khan's tenure was marked by a failure to restore democracy within the expected timeframe.(İşsever, 2024, s. 175) The deteriorating political climate in the country, along with increasing opposition to the government, uprisings, and the Bengali people's growing desire for independence, has intensified.(Kahraman, 1995, s. 18) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's resistance against Ayub Khan and his subsequent imprisonment resonated with the Bengali people, garnering sympathy. During the elections held under Yahya Khan's regime, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman entered the race strongly and secured

a majority in the Pakistani parliament. The contentious constitutional debates preceding the 1970 elections and the political conflicts between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman following the elections precipitated a period of political turmoil in the country.(Turabi, 2014, s. 158) As a consequence of these ongoing disputes, Bhutto was reluctant to relinquish power following the electoral process. This resulted in heightened political tensions within Pakistan and a notable disruption to the democratic process.

Following the 1970 elections, Yahya Khan asserted that he had completed a constitutional process that enabled the transfer of power to the people of Pakistan. He further claimed that a peaceful election had been conducted in accordance with this process. However, on 12 January 1971, he declined to respond to a journalist's question regarding the recognition of the Awami League as the majority party. In his statements on 14 January 1971, he mentioned having productive meetings with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and expressed that Mujibur Rahman would assume the role of Prime Minister of Pakistan in the future.(1971, ss. 143-145) In accordance with the intentions of Yahya Khan, a session of the National Assembly was scheduled to take place in Dhaka on 3 March 1971. However, the leaders of the PPP and the Awami League declined to attend, stipulating certain conditions. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman set forth specific conditions for his participation, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto demanded that the session be held in Islamabad and declared that they would not attend the session in Dhaka. This situation resulted in uprisings and massacres in East Pakistan. It was therefore crucial to convene the assembly in order to prevent the secession of East Pakistan. However, due to the unwillingness of political leaders to negotiate and the delivery of inflammatory speeches, the constitutional process was delayed. The postponement of the assembly's opening resulted in the escalation of violence in East Pakistan.(İşsever, 2024, s. 186) The Pakistani military-imposed curfews in various regions and arrested Bengali separatists. The Awami League was banned, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also arrested. In the wake of these developments, Major Ziaur Rahman proclaimed the declaration of Bangladesh's independence, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was subsequently designated as the country's inaugural President.(Mukerjee, 1972, s. 4) The politicians in East Pakistan were, for the most part, middle-class citizens, whereas those in West Pakistan were predominantly landowners. As a result, the landowners were disinclined to relinquish their political influence, apprehending the ascendance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and thus contributing to the fragmentation of Pakistan. As a consequence of the high population density in East Pakistan, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, emerged as the majority party in the national elections. In contrast, the Pakistan People's Party, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, only achieved electoral success in West Pakistan.

However, Bhutto was reluctant to transfer power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bhutto argued that the central government should have equal representation from both West and East Pakistan provinces, while Mujibur Rahman asserted that the majority of the people had given him the mandate to draft a constitution. Bhutto delayed the session of the National Assembly, preventing its opening. (Khalid, 1985, s. 136) Following the secession of East Pakistan, Yahya Khan resigned, Bhutto became president, and he convened the assembly to form the government.

## Conclusion

The establishment of a two-part Pakistan state in the east and west of India in 1947 was initially regarded as a viable solution for Muslims and received considerable support. However, due to significant geographical, cultural, economic and political differences, East Pakistan, despite having a larger population compared to West Pakistan, did not receive adequate representation in political and military spheres and was deprived of social rights. The post-partition enmity between India and Pakistan led India to encourage the separation of East and West Pakistan. The tenuous ties between East Pakistan and the larger political entity of Pakistan provided an opening for external actors, particularly India, to advocate for the country's partition. This culminated in the 1970 general elections. In the aforementioned elections, the Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, secured a notable victory in East Pakistan. However, this outcome was not acknowledged by Bhutto's administration. As a result, the population of East Pakistan rose up in order to establish an independent state separate from West Pakistan. The involvement of the Pakistani military in the uprising in East Pakistan resulted in a significant loss of life. This prompted international condemnation and led India to provide military support to the rebellious and separatist population in East Pakistan, which in turn led to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. Ultimately, on 16 December 1971, East Pakistan declared its independence as Bangladesh.

## Bibliography

- Afrasiab, M. H. Q. (2016). *1971 Fact and Fiction: Views and Perceptions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh* (Third edition.). Islamabad: Khurshed Printers Pvt. Ltd.
- Afroz, S., Cramb, R. ve Grünbühel, C. (2018). Vulnerability and Response to Cyclones in Coastal Bangladesh: A Political Ecology Perspective. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 46(6), 601-637.
- Ahmad, R. Z. (1998). *Pakistan, the Real Picture: A Comprehensive History Course 712 to 1995*. Lahor: Ferozsons.

- Ahmed, R. F. (1988). *Sadiyun ki Zencir*. Karaçi: Maktaba-i Üslub. <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/detail/sadyon-ki-zanjeer-raziya-faseeh-ahmad-ebooks adresinden erişildi>.
- Çodhri, Z. (2014). *Maşrîkî Pakistan ki Tahreek-e-Alayhidagî ka Âgâz* (2. bs., C. 10). Lahor: Şirket Printing Press.
- Durgun, R. (2015). *Ahmed Nedim Kasimi Toplumcu Gerçekçi Öyküleri*. Konya: Aybil Yayınları.
- Hasan, Z. (1994). *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism*. Karachi: Oxford University Press. <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.242578 adresinden erişildi>.
- İşsever, M. R. (2024). *Doğu ve Batı Pakistan'ın Ayrılışının Urdu Edebiyatına Yansımaları*. (C. Soydan, Ed.). İstanbul: Ravza Yayınları.
- Kahraman, K. (1995). Eyyûb Han. *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. İstanbul: TDV Yayınları.
- Khalid, S. M. (1985). *Albadar*. Lahor: Idara-i Matbuat-i Talaba. <http://archive.org/details/AlbadarBySaleemMansoorKhalid adresinden erişildi>.
- Ludden, D. (2011). The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(35), 79-85.
- Mahmood, S. (2018). *Pakistan Kiyun Tûtâ*. Lahor: Idara-i Sakafat-i Islamiyyah.
- Ministry of External Affairs - New Delhi. (1971). *Bangla Desh Documents*. Madras: The B. N. K. Press Private Limited.
- Mukerjee, D. (1972). *Yahya Khan's Final War*. Mumbai: A Times of India Publication. <http://archive.org/details/yahya-khans-final-war adresinden erişildi>.
- Naqvi, M. B. (2010). *Pakistan at Knife's Edge*. New Delhi: Roli Books Private Limited.
- Qamarul Ahsan, S. (1984). *Birth of Pakistan: Step By Step*. Lahor: Research Society of Pakistan University of Punjab.
- Reza, M. H. (2019). Political Activities of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a Charismatic Leader. *London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 19(4), 31-38.
- Şahbaz, D. (2023). *Pakistan Tarihi*. Ankara: Ötüken Neşriyat A.Ş.

Turabi, N. (2014). Sukut-i Dhaka ka Siyasi Pasmanzar  
our Gazal mein Uska Tahlikî Vufûr. *Daryaft*,  
13(13), 158-165.