

CHAPTER - IV

1954 ELECTIONS IN EAST BENGAL

The first general election, held in March 1954, was a significant event in the political history of Pakistan. It was a watershed in Pakistan's political development, because for the first time, it defeated the Muslim League which fought for and created Pakistan, It also brought into sharp focus the interests and aspirations of the people of East Bengal by voting for a United Front of opposition parties which contested the elections on a broad platform of regional autonomy which later was transformed into a struggle for national liberation in Bangladesh.

Background

After Pakistan come into being the Muslim League became the ruling party not only at the Centre but also in all the provinces. Mr. Mohd. Ali Jinnah the undisputed leader of the Muslim League, who did not have any previous experience in administration, became the first Governor-General of Pakistan and Liaquat Ali Khan, his close lieutenant, was appointed as the first Prime Minister. In East Bengal, Suhrawardy, who was the Chief Minister of undivided Bengal before partition, was defeated in the

election of leader of the Muslim League Legislature Party and Khawaja Nazimuddin was elected as its leader and, thus, he became the first Chief Minister of East Bengal.¹ After the death of Mohd. Ali Jinnah on 11 September 1948, Khawaja Nazimuddin, a lack-lustre politician was elevated to the post of Governor-General and he nominated Nurul Amin, who was a member in his Cabinet, to succeed him as the Chief Minister of East Bengal and he continued till the elections in East Bengal.² The leadership of the Muslim League was predominantly feudal and aristocratic in character.³ They also had the backing of the mercantile and industrial capitalists. Mohd. Ali Jinnah was the first President of the Pakistan Muslim League. After the reorganization of the Party in 1948, Chowdhury Khaliquzzaman was appointed its organiser and later, President. Similarly, in East Bengal, Moulana Akram Khan was chosen as the organiser of the Muslim League.⁴

¹The progressive section of the Bengal Muslim League led by H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim was completely kept out of the power structure that was created after the establishment of Pakistan by the feudal and aristocratic leadership of the Muslim League.

²Nurul Amin was the Chief Minister of East Bengal for about seven years. Nurul Amin rose from a District Board Chairman to the Chief Minister of East Bengal. He lacked vision, imagination and initiative.

³"Jinnah himself was not a landlord but he was surrounded by people who had considerable interests in land in one form or another. He himself had great authority in the Muslim League but there is no instance to show that he actually acted against the Indian feudal interests." See Badrudin Umar, Politics and Society in East Pakistan and Bangladesh, Mowla Brothers, Dacca, 1974, pp.1-2.

⁴According to the Party Constitution of 1948, no Minister, Central or Provincial, was eligible for Party Office

This arrangement was later abandoned and the Party constitution was amended and the separation of the Party leadership from the Governmental leadership was given up.⁵ As a result, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan became the President of the all Pakistan Muslim League and the provincial Chief Ministers became the Presidents of the Provincial Leagues. Thus, Muslim League after partition became an official party.

The character of the Muslim League had undergone a radical change in Pakistan. Now the task before the Party was infinitely complex and difficult. The Party leadership had never thought about the role, functions and policies of the Party as a ruling Party in the context of an independent state.⁶ In order to reconstruct the society, the Muslim League would have to build itself up as a comprehensive political organisation. But unfortunately the League failed to develop enduring organisational loyalties.⁷ It did not make any attempt to make itself

⁵This became necessary because after the death of Jinnah, the Muslim League lacked strong and effective leadership who could organise it on sound lines. This led to a series of ruthless struggle for power between the rival groups within the League.

Details see K.K. Aziz, Party Politics in Pakistan, 1947-1958 (National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, Islamabad, 1976, p.99. Also see Muzzafar Ahmed Choudhury, Government and Politics in Pakistan, (Puthigar Ltd., Dacca), 1968, p.377.

⁶Jamil-ud-Din Ahmad, "Political Developments in Pakistan", Pakistan Quarterly, 1967, p.35.

⁷Almond and Coleman, The Politics of the Developing Areas, p.195. Badruddin Umar writes: "The Muslim League had neither the organisational cohesiveness nor the theoretical basis which is required of a modern political party", Badruddin Umar, Op.cit., p.1.

popular among the people. It never presented before the people any comprehensive socio-economic programme on the basis of which a new society could be built. It remained as a coteric organisation and an instrument of the feudal and capitalist sections of the society.⁸ The result was that the Muslim League remained aloof from the masses and failed to rouse popular enthusiasm and support.⁹ The Party showed utter indifference towards the views and representations of its own Party members and workers. There was total absence of inner Party democracy in its functioning. No effort was made to persuade dissatisfied and dis-illusioned individuals and groups to remain within the Party and in some cases they were pushed into opposition. This led to the emergence of opposition parties in Pakistan but any opposition to Muslim League was treated as anti-State because they identified Party with the State.

The Muslim League did not also take serious note of the fact that Pakistan was a unique State geographically. The two wings of Pakistan were separated by about a thousand miles of foreign territory and there were linguistic, ethnological and cultural differences between

⁸ Mustaq Ahmad writes that the League rapidly became the monopoly of a class who used it for the realization of their own political ambitions and the advancement of their economic interests." Mustaq Ahmad, Government and Politics in Pakistan (Karachi, 1959), p.151.

⁹ The Awami League leader, H.S. Suhrawardy observed - that the Muslim League had no sense of purpose and no programme, that power politics more than principles and policies dominated its activities. See, Times of Karachi, October 23, 1953.

them. Again, they had different socio-economic conditions and opportunities of employment. When problems cropped up, if the Muslim League had shown statesmanship, it could have established some sort of belonging and a sense of unity between the two parts. Unfortunately, it did not. Rather, the Muslim League leadership by its unimaginative actions accentuated the differences between the two wings which culminated in the demand for regional autonomy and ultimately to secession.

Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the people of East Bengal began to feel a sense of deprivation and neglect. There was a strong feeling that the Muslim League governments both at the Centre and in the province were insensible to the genuine grievances of the people of East Bengal. They also felt that the real political power was gravitating towards the West.¹⁰ The mood was well reflected as early as 1948 when it was said in the constituent Assembly of Pakistan: "A feeling is growing among the East Pakistanis that Eastern Pakistan is being neglected and treated merely as a colony of West Pakistan."¹¹

¹⁰ Nurul Amin Government was only a puppet Government of the Centre. Provincial Government did not enjoy enough powers. There were also attempts to reduce the powers of the Provincial Government. Industry was taken out of the charge of the provincial government by the Centre. The Central Government, in such matters as finance and industries, did not act in a manner to satisfy the provincial government. In all vital matters the final decision was with the Centre. Details see, D.N. Bannerjee, East Pakistan - A Case Study in Muslim Politics (Vikas Publication, Delhi, 1969, pp.47-49).

¹¹ Begum Shaista Ikramullah, Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates, Vol.2, No.1, 24 February, 1948, p.7.

It was a fact that politically, economically and culturally, the East Bengal was being exploited by the West Pakistanis. From the very beginning the interests of East Bengal was looked down by the rulers of Pakistan. Therefore, frustration turned into indignation against the West Pakistanis rulers.

There were many reasons for this growing sense of dis-illusionment, frustration and indignation among the people of East Bengal and this could be understood in the context of changed power-base after Partition. As has been said earlier, the main reason was the most unequal distribution of real political power between the two wings. As a result, although authority was being apparently exercised by the East Pakistan politicians, they were really rendered ineffective by the West Pakistan bureaucrats backed by the Pakistan leadership at the Centre. All decision-making positions at the Centre were held by West Pakistan bureaucrats.¹² Similarly, all important positions in East Pakistan also were occupied by the West Pakistanis who had direct access to the central ruling clique. Thus, the East Bengalis felt that the economic interests of East Bengal were not safe under

¹² In the Central Secretariat, out of 734 Secretaries, Joint Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries and Under Secretaries, East Bengalis numbered only 42 with none in the rank of Secretary, only two as Joint Secretaries, 10 as Deputy Secretaries and 30 as Under Secretaries. See National Assembly of Pakistan Debates, Vol. I, Jan. 25, 1956, p.2050.

the bureaucratic domination of West Pakistan whom they considered unsympathetic to the Province.¹³ The result was bitterness and a widening gap between the two wings.

The people of East Bengal were unhappy with the Muslim League and the Central Government because they did not promote their happiness and did not redress their grievances. The economic policy of Pakistan had a pronounced bias in favour of West Pakistan at the expense of East Pakistan. The fact that the capital of Pakistan and all the three headquarters of the armed forces and almost all the ordinance factories and training centres were located in the West accounted for the larger investment in that part of the country.¹⁴ East Bengal did not derive any advantage from the economic policy of the State.¹⁵ The Central Government controlled by West Pakistan bureaucrats did not allocate to East Pakistan

¹³ Khalid Bin Sayeed, The Political System of Pakistan p.213.

East Bengal's representation in the army was also very limited. They had a bare 5 per cent in the military elite. Details See, Dawn (Karachi), Jan. 8, 1955, (quoted by Rounaq Jahan, Pakistan: Failure in National Integration, (Oxford University Press, Bangladesh, 1973, p.25).

¹⁴ During the last nine years, Government of Pakistan incurred in West Pakistan an overall expenditure of Rs.960 crores, forming about 95 per cent of the total. In East Pakistan the Central Government's expenditure amounted to Rs.52 crores constituting the remaining 5 per cent of the total expenditure. See, A Sadeque, The Economic Emergence of Pakistan, Part II, Economic Publication Series 11. Published by the Provincial Statistical Board and Bureau of Commercial and Industrial Intelligence (Planning Department), Dacca, 1956, p.5.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.5.

sufficient amount for development expenditure.¹⁶ The Central Government allocated nearly two-thirds of its developmental and non-developmental funds to West Pakistan. Whereas the Central Government did much to develop the private sector in West Pakistan through its economic and fiscal policies and its control of foreign exchange, import licensing, it did nothing of the kind in East Bengal. This was one of the important reasons why private investment in East Bengal was almost negligible during the early period. East Bengal had considerable export earning ability.¹⁷ But the bulk of foreign exchange earnings from the export of jute and a lion's share of foreign aid and loans were utilized in importing machinery and raw materials for their gathering the West Pakistan's industrial complex.¹⁸ The result of the deliberate economic policies of the Central Government was there was imbalance in the economic development both the wings of Pakistan. East Pakistan occupied a disadvantageous position. The economic condition of the people in

¹⁶This is clear from the allocation of developmental expenditure between East Pakistan and West Pakistan under the First Five Year Plan:

	W.P.	E.P.
Developmental Expenditure	- 546 crores	254 crores
Non-developmental expenditure	850 "	150 "
Total expenditure	1396 "	406 "

Details see A.N.M. Mahmood, "Regional Allocation of Resources, in the First Five Year Plan", Pakistan Observer, Nov. 25, 1956.

¹⁷During the first eight years, East Pakistan was deprived of its foreign exchange earnings to the tune of 273 crores. Details See A.N.M. Mahmood, Ibid.

¹⁸M.V. Lakhi, "The Two Wings", Seminar No.117, May 1969, p.19.

East Bengal was miserable. Their purchasing power was very low. The prices of essential commodities shot up. It was beyond their capacity to purchase them. Added to this population was increasing geometrically but the production of food grains was not proportionate to the growth of population. There was chronic deficiency of food stuffs. The misery of the poor increased with the failure of the harvest in 1952-53. There was famine.¹⁹ The report by the socio-economic survey conducted by Dacca University revealed "the growing unemployment among landless farmers, an outdated rural credit system and the miserably poor standard of living of the average East Pakistani peasant."²⁰

Another important event which induced the Bengalis to adopt a hostile attitude towards the Muslim League and the Central Government was the latter's unimaginative attempt to impose urdu on the people of East Pakistan as the only language of the State. The remark of Mohd. Ali Jinnah that "the State language of Pakistan is going to be urdu and no other language,"²¹ caused much resentment among them. The language controversy remained unresolved until the 1954 Elections.²²

¹⁹Y.V. Gankovsky, L.R. Gordon Polonskaya, Op.cit., p.188

²⁰Details see, Pakistan Times, August 20, 1957.

²¹Quid-i-Agam Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Op.cit., p.86.

²²Details see First Chapter.

The country had no constitution for long time because the Pakistan leaders did not know how to proceed after having achieved a state. Similarly, the idea that Pakistan should be an Islamic State created complications.²³ This was one of the most important reasons for the constitutional deadlock in Pakistan. The interim report of the Basic principles Committee of the Constituent Assembly which had been constituted to report on the constitutional framework of the country drew sharp criticisms from East Bengal. It was felt in East Bengal that the interim report of Basic Principle Committee, if implemented, would reduce East Bengal's majority to a minority. After the publication of the Report East Bengalis said that Punjab was trying to dominate East Bengal.²⁴ Since then, the East-West representation in the Federal Legislature became the major stumbling bloc in constitution-making.

It was in this background that the Muslim League ministry in East Bengal announced that elections to the Provincial Legislature would be held in March 1954.²⁵ It

²³ Badruddin Umar, Op.cit., p.1.

²⁴ Details see, E. Rahim, "Landmarks in Pakistan's Constitution-making", Pakistan Times, March 1956.

²⁵ During the period 1947-58, no general elections was held nationally in Pakistan. Only the Provincial elections were held. Even the provincial elections were held after several years when it was due. Elections to the Punjab and North-West Frontier Legislative Assemblies were held in 1951 and to the Sind in 1953. As Robert Laporte, J.R. rightly observed, "clearly, electoral politics were not part of the national political process." Robert Laporte, JR, Power and Privilege, Influences and Decision-Making in Pakistan, (Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi), 1976, p.42.

should be noted that the Muslim League did not try to create democratic traditions in the country. The Bengal Assembly, whose members were elected in 1946 under a limited franchise on issues that were totally different, had long ago ceased to reflect public opinion. There were demands for fresh election.²⁶ More than once its life had been extended and about 34 by-elections had been kept pending, thus depriving the electorate of even this limited opportunity to pronounce a verdict on the record of administration.²⁷ Thus the Muslim League and the Government showed their disregard to the democratic process.²⁸

²⁶ Government replied that they calculated the term of the Assembly not from the last election (1946) but from the first meeting of the house after independence (March 15, 1948). So the five year term was allowed to run until 1953. In 1953 the constituent Assembly prolonged the life of the East Bengal Assembly by one year. [The East Bengal Legislative Assembly continuance Act, 1953] K.K. Aziz, Party Politics in Pakistan 1947-1958, (National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, Islamabad, 1976), p.72. For detailed account of the arguments of the Government see Report on the general election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 1954. (Government of East Bengal, Home Department: Constitution and Elections, Feb. 25, 1956, Dacca), pp.1-4.

²⁷ During this period, only Tangail by-election was held on 22 April, 1949. There were four candidates in the field. Mohammed Shamsul Huq, an independent candidate supported by the opposition, was elected defeating the Muslim League (Government) candidate, Khurram Khan Panni. But the Muslim League Government did not allow him to attend the Assembly. Election case was started against him on the ground that he indulged corrupt practices in the election and his election was set aside.

Details see Dacca Gazette, Extra-ordinary, Feb. 21, 1951, pp.115-135. Also see Tajuddin Ahmad's Diary - Feb 15, 1951. Also see East Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, vol. II, 1953, p.v.

²⁸ M. Rashiduzzaman, Pakistan: A Study of Government and Politics (Ideal Library, Dacca, 1967, p.112).

With the provincial election scheduled for March 8-12th, 1954,²⁹ the Political Parties in East Bengal pressed themselves into action. The main political parties contesting the Muslim Seats were (1) Muslim League, (2) United Front (comprising of East Pakistan Awami League, Muslim League, Krishak Sramik Party, the Nizami-i-Islam Party, and Ganatantri Dal) (3) Khilafat Rabbani Party. There were Independents also for the Muslim seats. The non-Muslim Seats were contested by a minority United Front, the Ganatantri Dal, Communist Party of East Pakistan, besides the two main non-Muslim Parties - the Pakistan National Congress and the Scheduled Castes Federation.

We have already discussed the position of the Muslim League in East Bengal. The only advantage the party had at the time of election was that it was the ruling party. The Muslim League manifesto was published on 13 December, 1953. It pledged for adoption of Bengali as one of the State languages, adequate defence arrangements for East Pakistan, agrarian reforms, medical and public health improvement, encouragement of big and small

²⁹It was first scheduled to be held by mid-February 1954. This election was held on the basis of adult franchise. The total number of seats in the Assembly were 309. It assigned 237 seats to Muslims, 31 seats to the general population, 38 seats to scheduled castes, 1 seat to Pakistan Christians and 2 seats to Budhists. Of the Muslim, General and scheduled caste seats, there were respectively 9, 1 and 2 seats reserved for women of the three communities.

See Report on the general election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 1954, Op.cit., p.3.

industries, educational reform and free primary compulsory education and teaching of Quraan to be compulsory for Muslim children. The manifesto also laid stress on Nizam-e-Islam and envisaged constitution based on Quran and Sunnah.³⁰

Of the opposition parties, the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League which was founded in 1949 by dissident Muslim Leaguers who belonged to the Suhrawardy - Abul Hashim faction of the pre-partition Bengal Muslim League, was by far the best organised party in East Bengal. Its leaders like Maulana Bhashani and H.S. Suhrawardy were very popular in East Bengal. It was also supported by a substantial sections of the students represented by the East Pakistan Muslim Students League and a left-oriented organisation, youth League, formed in 1952. The East Pakistan Awami Muslim League benefitted most from the popular language movement of 1948 and 1952, though the movements were organised by the students. The East Pakistan Middle class - students teachers, lawyers, petty-traders and rich peasants in the countryside provided the social base of the party. This party was successful in exploiting the growing discontent among the middle class in its favour. In fact, at the time of election, the Party emerged as the true champion of the

³⁰ Details See, Morning News (Dacca), 15 December 1953.

interests of East Pakistan. The 41-Point manifesto adopted by the East Bengal Awami League on 15 November 1953 reflected the truth of this assertion. The manifesto promised among other things:

- 1) nationalise jute and tea industry;
- 2) abolish the Zamindari system without compensation;
- 3) repeal all safety Acts and withdraw all restrictions on Newspapers, persons and institutions. It would reduce expenditure. If fixed the salary of the Ministers at Rs.1000 p.m.;
- 4) make East Bengal a fully autonomous unit;
- 5) establish military college and an ammunition factory in the province to make East Bengal "self-sufficient in defence";
- 6) make Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan;
- 7) separation of judiciary from the executive;
- 8) declare property of ministers, MLAs, Ex-MIAs, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of self-governing bodies from 1940. To make Pakistan a democratic State the party will work with West Pakistan to elect a new constituent Assembly on adult franchise;
- 9) hold by-elections within three months from the date on which vacancy occurred; If an Awami League nominee was defeated consecutively in three by-elections the Party's Ministry would resign;
- 10) encourage cottage industries, resettle refugees, abolish the civil supplies Department, declare February 21 as a national holiday, de-requisition school buildings, provide cheap education and free educational institutions.³¹

³¹ Pakistan Times, November 18, 1953.

Unlike the Muslim League's manifesto which did not contain any concrete socio-economic programme, the manifesto of the Awami League was quite impressive and reflected the needs of the province. It emphasised drastic agrarian and administrative reforms, it promised to make East Bengal a fully autonomous unit with all powers except foreign affairs, defence and currency. The Party clearly perceived that provincial autonomy was the only solution for the manifold ills of the province. It did not compromise with its programme even when it formed a United Front along with other opposition Parties and formulated a common programme.

The Krishak Sramik Party (Peasant-Worker Party) was founded on July 27, 1953 by A.K. Fazlul Huq who revived his old Provincial organisation, the Krishak Proja Party which was formed in 1927. Fazlul Huq was a very popular leader in the Pre-Partition Bengal. He along with most of his followers joined the Muslim League in August 1937 which made the Muslim League in Bengal a popular Party. Since the expulsion of Huq from the Muslim League in 1941, his popularity began to decline and became an unimportant figure in Bengal Politics before 1947. His Party (KPP), also disappeared from the Political Scene. After being in political wilderness for more than a decade, Huq revived his old Party with a new name with his personal

followers and disgruntled Muslim Leaguers.³² The change in Party nomenclature from Krishak Proja to Krishak Sramik was meant to reflect the growing importance of the working classes.³³ Huq shaped the policy of his Party with a moderate programme. Personally he was critical of the growth of communist strength in East Bengal.³⁴ In a statement issued on 29th July, 1953, Huq outlined the objects of the Party which included inter-alia the establishment of Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan, nationalization of jute trade, full provincial autonomy for East Pakistan, educational re-orientation in the province, arrangement for the realization of Zakat in the mofussil in order to create a Bait-ul-Mal, secure equal rights for minorities, national Planning of labour, industrialization of the country and improvements in the methods of agriculture.³⁵ The Party was not organised on communal lines. It had a secular outlook. Organisationally, it was very weak. The only asset of the Party

³² Nurul Amin Ministry appointed A.K. Fazlul Huq as the Advocate-General of East Pakistan. He continued in this Post till 1953. After resigning from the post, Huq began to openly criticise the Muslim League. He also expressed his wish to join the Awami League in the public meetings organised by the Awami League at Chadpar and Dacca (Paltan Maidan). (Annual Report of General Secretary Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, Annual Council Conference, Sec.p.8).

³³ M. Rafique Afzal, Political Parties in Pakistan, 1947-1958, p.123.

³⁴ Richard L. Park, "East Bengal: Pakistan's Troubled Province", Far Eastern Survey, +Vol.XXIII, No.5, May 1954, p.73.

³⁵ Morning News (Dacca), July 30, 1953.

was the popularity of its leader. To many Huq was a symbol of political competence and vigorous, honest leadership.³⁶

As against the Awami League and the Krishak Sramik Party which were liberal and apparently secular, Nizam-i-Islam, founded in 1950, was a conservative and orthodox Party. It emerged out of the East Pakistan branch of the Jamiat-at al Ulama-i Islam under the leadership of the Provincial Party President, Moulana Athar Ali. It stood for the establishment of an Islamic Polity based on Quranic principles and in that sense it became an effective counter-vailing force against the conservative section of the Muslim League. Its influence in East Bengal was limited and its main support came from the orthodox religious leaders who exerted great influence on the constitution-makers towards giving an Islamic character to the constitution. The dismissal of the Nazimuddin ministry in April 1953 and the fear of an un-Islamic constitution being imposed, as well as the mounting opposition to the Muslim League, induced it to function as a Political Party, independent of the Muslim League, and to contest the elections as such.³⁷ Eventhough its main concern was the establishment of an

³⁶ Richard L. Park, "East Bengal: Pakistans' Troubled Province", Op.cit., p.73.

³⁷ Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., p.124.

Islamic order, it supported some of the genuine demands of the people such as language and provincial autonomy.

Ganatantri Dal (Democratic Party)

The Ganatantri Dal, the East Pakistan counter-part of the Azad Pakistan Party of Mian Iftikhar-al-Din was established on January 19, 1953 by Mahmud Ali, a former General Secretary of the Assam Muslim Students Federation with the support of Haji Muhammad Danish, a legendary Kishan leader. It was a non-communal and radical organisation comprising of a small group of leftists and its influence was limited in East Pakistan but served as a catalytic of change in Awami League periodically.³⁸ The manifesto of the party promised,³⁹

- 1) Quitting the British Commonwealth and declaring Pakistan as a Sovereign democratic republic and introduction of joint electorate;
- 2) Confiscation of foreign capital and interests employed in the commerce and industries of Pakistan;
- 3) Abolition of Zamindari system without compensation, confiscation of excess lands from individual landholders and its redistribution amongst the landless and poor peasants;
- 4) Nationalisation of export trade in jute, expansion of jute market, guaranteeing a minimum price of Jute to the cultivators;
- 5) Positive encouragement of private National capital in industrialising the country;

³⁸ D.N. Banerjee, East Pakistan - A Case Study in Muslim Politics, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1969, p.65.

³⁹ He said that his party had discussed the programme with the representatives of the Awami League, Krishak Sramik Party, Communist Party and Khilafat-e-Rabbani Party. Some of these Parties agreed to the programme but others objected to one of the points which relates to confiscation of foreign capital. Pakistan Times, November 29, 1953.

- 6) Establishment of civil liberties - release of all Political Prisoners and withdrawal of interment orders and warrants issued against political workers - annulment of all black laws, ordinances and to guarantee freedom of speech, worship, association and Press;
- 7) Recognition of Bengali as one of the State Languages of Pakistan;
- 8) Right to live - security against unemployment and high cost of living;
- 9) Advancement of education and health of the people - introduction of free and compulsory primary education; and
- 10) Establishment of Pakistan - Bharat amity.⁴⁰

Khilafat-i-Rabbani Party (Divine Sovereign Party) an Islamic Political organisation, was founded on April 21, 1952 and was formally established in September 1953 with Abul Hashim, a former general secretary of the undivided Bengal Muslim League, as its first President.⁴¹ It promised among other things the implementation of the economic, social, political and cultural principles of Islam into national administration, assured the minorities of equal rights of citizenship with the Muslims as enunciated in the Quran and Sunnah, adoption of Bengali as one of the national languages and complete zonal autonomy, with only three subjects vested in the Centre.⁴² Politically, organisationally and electorally, it was a

⁴⁰ Morning News (Dacca), November 29, 1953.

⁴¹ Dawn, April 22, 1952, see, M. Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., p.124.

⁴² Other points included in its election programme were; freedom of conscience, civil rights, state control over big industries, abolition of all rent-receiving interests in land, guaranteed employment, minimum wage, adoption of taxes on food stuffs and necessities of life, and repeal of the Safety Act.

See K.K. Aziz, Op.cit., pp.163-164.

Also see, Dawn, September 3, December 24, 1953.

weak organisation.

The two left parties which contested the election were the Communist Party of Pakistan and the Pakistan Socialist Party, but they were, either politically or electorally, inconsequential in East Pakistan. The Communists even though a small group, were well organised and had some influence among the students, the working class and a section of the intellectuals. In fact, the communists were more effective than the other Political Parties such as the Awami League and the Ganatantri Dal. It released a 22-Point Programme on December 2, 1953 to provide the basis of a United Front of opposition Parties against the Muslim League. The salient features of the programme were the recognition of Bengali as one of the State languages, "full autonomy" for the province in all subjects excepting foreign affairs, defence and currency and abolition of Zamindari without compensation.⁴³ The Pakistan Socialist Party did not contest the election as a Party in East Pakistan.⁴⁴

The Pakistan National Congress and the Pakistan Scheduled Castes' Federation were the instruments through

⁴³ Among other points in its election programme were: severance of relations from the British Commonwealth, a foreign policy based on 'peace', "establishment of Pakistan - Bharat amity", peaceful solution of the Kashmir dispute and holding of a free and fair plebiscite in Kashmir, annulment of the Safety Act, introduction of free primary education, protection of national industry and measures for the improvement of the social and economic condition of various classes of people.

Morning News (Dacca), December 3, 1953.

⁴⁴ Party's Programme and the reasons for its stunted growth, See K.K. Aziz, Op.cit., pp.117-123.

which the minorities - caste Hindus (8.6 per cent) and Scheduled Castes (9.8 per cent)⁴⁵ - who constituted 18.4 per cent of the people of East Pakistan, tried to safeguard their interests and to ensure political participation in Pakistani Politics.⁴⁶ These parties, because of their limited support base, could never fulfil the role of an opposition Party in East Pakistan by presenting an alternative for the approval of the electors. They wanted to work for a closer affinity with India, the foundation of a secular State in Pakistan and alleviation of the economic ills of minorities in Pakistan.

From all these it becomes evident that the ruling Muslim League, at the time of election, became unpopular and its leadership which was traditional and conservative and which represented the landed interests, ceased to represent the interests of the East Pakistani middle class which did not have any access to the power structure which was dominated by the West Pakistanis. Even the opposition Parties before they decided to form an electoral alliance, were weak and fragmented.

Politics of United Front

Mounting antagonism against the Muslim League resulted in the formation of a United Front. The opposition

⁴⁵ Population Census of Pakistan, 1961, Bulletin No.2, p.19.

⁴⁶ There were hardly any caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes in West Pakistan.

Political Parties realised that the existence of numerous Political parties fighting among themselves would only strengthen the Muslim League.⁴⁷ The idea of a United Front was initiated by Youth League,⁴⁸ the Communists and the Ganatantri Dal,⁴⁹ which was later taken up by the left wing of the Awami League⁵⁰ and the Krishak Sramik Party. Even Suhrawardy and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had to revise their stand and support the idea of United Front because of tremendous pressure exerted upon them by the students and youths. This idea of United Front was gradually embraced by other opposition parties also. Forging a United Front of opposition Parties was a difficult task because of personality differences between leaders like Suhrawardy and Fazlul Huq

⁴⁷Kamruddin Ahmad, a leading member of Awami League said that it was always the practice of Communists to forge a national platform in the name of United Front so that they could use the platform and popularise their programme and manifesto. Interviewed on February 15, 1974.

⁴⁸As early as September, 1952, the Youth League of East Pakistan issued an appeal to create a United Front conbracing all opposition organisations.

Y.V. Gankovsky, L.R. Gordon, Polonskaya, Op.cit., p.198.

⁴⁹See above mentioned Election Programme of these parties.

⁵⁰Suhrawardy and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leaders of the right wing in the Awami League, were opposed to any alliance with those Parties and persons who supported the Muslim League. They maintained that Fazlul Huq had accepted a Government job under the Muslim League Government and had supported many of the undemocratic Acts passed by the ministry. Once got elected, these people might support the Muslim League for their self-interest. Details See Annual Reports of General Secretary, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Bengali) to the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League Annual Council Conference, 21, 22, 23 October 1955. Published by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, General Secretary, 56, Simson Road, Dacca, p.5.

and Maulana Bhashani and Moulana Athar Ali and programme differences between parties like the Ganatantri Dal and Nizam-i-Islam Party.⁵¹ However by November 1953, Awami League, Krishak Sramik Party, Ganatantri Dal and East Pakistan Communist Party held their Party conferences and from their individual platforms they expressed their determination to form a United opposition front to fight the Muslim League on the basis of policies and programme and they had empowered their respective leaders to conduct negotiations on this matter.⁵² As a result of negotiations conducted by the leaders of Awami League and Krishak Sramik Party, an agreement was reached for the purpose of forming a United Front. In a joint statement issued by Bhashani and Huq after the meeting on December 4, 1953, said: "We shall now endeavour to contact all parties opposed to the Muslim League and forge a broader, United Front, with the co-operation of all Parties."⁵³ The steps towards formation of a United Front comprising all democratic Parties and groups had been welcomed by politically conscious people. After forming the United Front, Fazlul Huq entered into an agreement with Nizam-e-Islam.⁵⁴ Later,

⁵¹ M. Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., p.125.

⁵² See Morning News, Nov. 17, 18, 1953 and Pakistan Times, Nov. 17, 23, 1953.

⁵³ The Azad (Dacca), December 5, 1953.

⁵⁴ According to Awami League leaders, Mr. Fazlul Huq had secretly entered into a 10-Point agreement with Nizam-e-Islam. They did not know of it till one of the National Assembly members of Nizam-e-Islam made a statement in this regard. When the 10-Point agreement was made known, it was found that few points were not acceptable to us. See Annual Report of General Secretary Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Bengali) to the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League Annual Council Conference, 21, 22, 23, October 1953, Op.cit., p.10.

Fazlul Huq prevailed upon Moulana Bhashani that Nizam-e-Islam was also brought in because the Muslim League had taken the advantage over the United Front by misleading the people in the name of Islam. To stop misleading propaganda, Bhashani and Huq agreed that the inclusion of Nizam-e-Islam would go a long way to counteract the propaganda of Muslim League in the name of religion. Soon Ganatantri Dal also joined these parties and thus emerged the "Jukta Front" (United Front). The constituents of the United Front were East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, Krishak Proja Party, Nizam-e-Islam Party and Ganatantri Dal.⁵⁵ The United Front was an organisation of different democratic political parties on the basis of an agreed minimum programme with all the component party maintaining their separate identities. It is significant that the United Front comprised of such dissimilar personalities like Suhrawardy and Huq, and Moulana Bhashani and Moulana Athar Ali. It also represented a wide spectrum of political ideologies ranging from communists on one side and to Nizam-e-Islam, a party believing in the rule of religion, on the other side. This did not, however, stand in the way of forming a mighty looking United Front against the ruling Muslim League which had always

⁵⁵ Parties like Khilafat-i-Rabbani Party and East Pakistan Communist Party were not formally recognised as component parties of the United Front; but there was a tacit understanding that they would not put up candidates in constituencies being contested by the United Front.

exploited the disunity among the opposition Parties. So far, the ruling party, torn by internal conflicts, had used the argument, and with great success, that in the country, there was no alternative to the Muslim League. The people, therefore, must accept its domination. The formation of the United Front would thus provide the alternative for which politically conscious people had been craving.⁵⁶

The United Front set up an office in Dacca to organise the opposition forces, a steering committee and an Appellate Board. The Steering Committee⁵⁷ should discuss and finalise the candidates and if anybody was not satisfied by the decision of the Committee, then they could appeal to the Appellate Board⁵⁸ whose decision was final. A Committee was also appointed to draft a manifesto for the party. The Convenor of the manifesto Committee was Abul Mansur Ahmad who drew up a 42 points manifesto which was placed before the Steering Committee of the United Front. Suhrawardy insisted the revision

⁵⁶ Pakistan Times wrote that the formation of a United Front in East Bengal against the Muslim League would be a step towards such a front on a country-wide scale. Pakistan Times, November 23, 1953.

⁵⁷ It was formed with equal representatives of Awami League and KSP. From the Awami League, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Aaur Rahman Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were taken in the Steering Committee. Kafiluddin Ahmad Chowdhury, Taffazal Hussain and Mohan Mia were from the KSP. Suhrawardy was the Chairman.

⁵⁸ The Appellate Board was of three persons - Fazlul Huq, Moulana Bhashani and Suhrawardy.

of the manifesto. Therefore the number of points was reduced to 18. The Awami Leaguers wanted autonomy on the basis of the Lahore Resolution which was included. Kafiluddin Ahmad Chowdhury of Krishak Sramik Party wanted to safeguard the interest of the jute growers and thus added yet another point on nationalisation of jute trade. Finally, Kamruddin Ahmad, a leader of the Trade Union movement wanted to add something for the industrial labourers which was also included in the interest of the labour.⁵⁹ A common election manifesto of the 21-Point Programme⁶⁰ was drawn up. It said that the United Front, if voted to power, would implement this programme within the next five years. It also promised that "there will be no enactment in the House which is repugnant to the fundamental principles of the Holy Quran and the Sunah. Provisions will be made for the citizens to live their lives on the basis of Islamic equality and brother-hood."⁶¹ The 21-Point Programme, accommodated the important programmes of all the parties in the United Front, but it differed in some degree from their declared party platforms. It was not a well thought out programme.⁶² It embodied conflicting goals.

⁵⁹Kazi Ahmed Kamal, Politicians and Inside Stories, Published by Kazi Giasuddin Ahmed, 117 Elephant Lane, Maghbazar, Dacca, 1970, pp.80-81.

⁶⁰see appendix-I.

⁶¹Ibid

⁶²The Front as such had never the opportunity to discuss the programme and formally to adopt it. For most of the candidates, it was a take-it or leave it choice.

Abdus Salam, "The Political Scene-1", Pakistan Observer, August 20, 1954.

However, it was accepted by the opposition Parties and considered it to be a "Charter of Freedom" for East Bengal, while their opponents described it as utterly impracticable and impossible of implementation.⁶³ It focussed attention of the people to the basic problems facing the country. It also indicated the method of solving it.⁶⁴ It embodied the aims and aspirations of East Pakistan middle class. It also contained points which would appeal to the peasants and workers.⁶⁵ In short the 21-Point programme incorporated many democratic demands such as regional autonomy, self-sufficiency in defence, recognition of Bengali as one of the national languages, release of political prisoners⁶⁶ and repeal of all repressive laws. It also promised periodical free, and fair elections, guaranteeing of economic and social rights to industrial workers, nationalization of

⁶³There were also some people within the United Front who were opposed to points like minister's salary, resignation of the ministry six months before the general election etc. which they characterised as too much honesty.

See Abul Mansur Ahmed, Fifty Years of Politics (a Political autobiography written in Bengali) Dacca, 1968, pp.256, 258.

⁶⁴In the past, programmes and policies had a little say in election and personal and group factors had often dominated the scene.

⁶⁵21-Point Manifesto had a great appeal among the middle class intellectuals, students and workers, who rallied round the United Front in large numbers.

See Mafizullah Kabir, Experiences of an Exile at Home, Life in Occupied Bangladesh, p.10.

⁶⁶In the years from 1948 to 1954, there were over three thousand political prisoners in East Bengal's jails. Tariq Ali, Pakistan, p.51.

jute and securing fair prices, and levelling up of economic inequalities.⁶⁷ Thus a broad based programme which would appeal to different sections of the society was formulated.

Nomination Politics

Muslim League and other parties except United Front did not have any problem in selecting candidates to contest the election. United Front had a tough task in selecting candidates because of the conflicting claims put forward by the constituent units. As has been stated earlier, the United Front formed a Steering Committee for this purpose. Huq and Bhashani in a statement issued on December 15, 1953 invited applications from candidates intending to contest the provincial election on the United Front tickets.⁶⁸ The Steering Committee decided that it would select candidates on the basis of his personal popularity in the constituency concerned, the influence of his family in the locality and his financial ability to manage the election against the Muslim League

⁶⁷Some other points like converting the Burdwan House into a Bengali Academy and raising a monument for the martyres' of the language movement were adopted as appeals to the sentiments of the students and the youths on whose cooperation and active assistance the Front depended in the election. Abdus Salam, "The Political Scene-1", Pakistan Observer, August 20, 1954.

⁶⁸It said that application must be in the prescribed forms available in the office of the United Front on payment of annas 4 and intending candidates must make a contribution of Rs.100 and obtain a receipt which must be enclosed with the application. The candidates were required to sign a pledge accepting the 21-Point Programme of the United Front, See, Morning News (Dacca) Dec.16, 1953.

candidate.⁶⁹ The members of the Awami League, Krishak Sramik Party, Ganatantri Dal, Nizam-e-Islam as well as some individuals who did not belong to any of these parties filed application for the United Front nomination.⁷⁰ The Committee met deputations on behalf of the candidates but the representatives of the constituent parties seldom agreed to any one candidate and very often the Front was on verge of breakdown. The fear of the common enemy, the Muslim League, however, kept them together.⁷¹ When the list of candidates was published, Huq and Bhashani refused to accept it and they published their own lists. This created a serious situation. It was Suhrawardy who tried to bring about a compromise between them by negotiating on the merits of their respective candidates. Meanwhile, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman also rebelled for nominating candidates against his Party candidates.⁷² The leader of the

⁶⁹See Kamruddin Ahmad, A Social History of Bengal, (Progoti Publishing, Dacca, (3rd Ed.) 1970, p.113.

⁷⁰The Nizam-e-Islam submitted to the United Front a list of 102 members. None of them neither paid R.100 nor signed the pledge. See the statement of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, General Secretary of East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, Morning News (Dacca), April 17, 1954.

⁷¹Kamruddin Ahmed, Op.cit. p.113. Also See Annual report of General Secretary, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, Annual Council Conference, 21, 22, 23 October 1955, Op.cit., pp.10-11.

⁷²Prof. Qasim Quamaruzzaman, a member of the Working Committee of the Awami League, alleged that the Steering Committee was completely dominated by Hamidul Huq Chowdhury and Mohan Mia who were expelled from the Muslim League and now leaders of Krishak Sramik Party. As a result, most of the workers of the Awami League had been sacrificed in preference to "money, personal allegiance and clique politics." Details see his statement to the Press on February 4, 1954, Morning News (Dacca), Feb. 5, 1954.

Five leaders of the United Front, in a joint statement, expressed their dissatisfaction about the way nomination of candidates was manipulated by the Krishak Sramik Party leaders. See Morning News (Dacca) Jan. 22, 1954. Also interview with Kamruddin Ahmed.

Nizam-e-Islam, Moulana Athar Ali, also set up 3rd candidates against the nominees of the United Front after 26 of his nominees had already been selected by the Steering Committee and his representatives participating in the selection of candidates.⁷³ Nizam-e-Islam leaders accused the United Front for selecting undesirable candidates, and communists.⁷⁴ Yet these differences were not allowed to reach a breaking point before the elections, though cracks were visible in the United Front.

The Muslim League and the United Front set up their candidates for all the 237 Muslim seats. Other small parties like Khilafat-i-Robbani Party, Communal Party and independents also filed nominations for the Muslim seats.

Neither the caste Hindus nor the scheduled castes had been able to put up an agreed list of candidates. Among the caste Hindus two groups - the Pakistan National Congress and the Minority United Front - contested 31 seats. The Congress set up 31 candidates in the general (caste Hindus) constituencies and 9 candidates in the scheduled caste constituencies. The Minority United Front which comprised of the Gana Samity, the Socialist Party and the

⁷³ See the statement of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, General Secretary of East Pakistan Awami Muslim League Morning News (Dacca), April 17, 1954.

⁷⁴ Dawn, March 6, 1954.

Abhoy Ashram set up 19 candidates in both the general (caste Hindus) and Scheduled caste constituencies. There was a triangular fight for 38 scheduled caste seats, including two for women. There were three organisations by the same name and each claiming to be the genuine East Bengal Scheduled Castes Federation. These three groups were led by D.N. Basori, a minister in the East Bengal cabinet, Rasraj Mandal and H.C. Burmen respectively. All these groups had pitted their nominees separately besides a large number of independents and congress candidates. The Rasraj Mandal group had the support of the Minority United Front. In all there were 54 scheduled caste candidates in the arena for the nine seats reserved for the community.⁷⁵

Campaign

The Election was fought on various issues by different parties. The Muslim League had began its campaign in January 1954. It emphasised its contribution towards the achievement of Pakistan and called upon the people to vote for it in order to maintain the "very existence of Pakistan". Addressing a special conference of the All-East Pakistan Muslim Students League in Dacca on

⁷⁵ Information collected from Morning News, January 5, 1954, Pakistan Times, January 31, February 3, 1954, and Dawn, March 8, 1954. Five candidates had been declared elected unopposed. They included 3 nominees of the Pakistan National Congress, one Christian and one woman from a Scheduled Caste reserved constituency. No Muslim candidate was returned unopposed. Pakistan Times, Feb. 3, 1954.

January 21, 1954, Chief Minister, Nurul Amin said that the General Election would be a "sort of referendum to decide if East Pakistan would remain a part of Pakistan or join Bharat."⁷⁶ He accused that the United Front comprised elements who were against the very ideology of Islam and who did not want Pakistan to come into being and that they had now combined to destroy Pakistan and disrupt the organisation which brought Pakistan into being.⁷⁷ Nurul Amin made scathing attacks against the two prominent leaders of the United Front - Huq and Suhrawardy. He accused Huq of rendering disservice to the Muslim nation by forming the Shyama Prasad Mookherjee - Huq coalition Ministry in 1937 and opposing Muslim League in 1946 when the election was fought on the issue of Pakistan. He also accused Suhrawardy that he entered into a compact with Sarat Chandra Bose for the formation of sovereign Bengal against the demand of Pakistan.⁷⁸ The Muslim League leaders thus identified the solidarity of Pakistan with the victory of the Muslim League. They also emphasised that only Muslim League could bring about greater harmony between East and West Pakistan and between East Pakistan and the Centre. They also said that the aim of the United Front was the formation of United Bengal

⁷⁶ Morning News (Dacca), January 22, 1954.

⁷⁷ Ibid.,

⁷⁸ Morning News (Dacca), January 5, 1954.

as a part of Bharat.⁷⁹ Again, they said that the Muslim League would establish a constitution based on Islamic principle.⁸⁰ They also laid emphasis on the inherent disunity among the component parties of the United Front. They described the United Front as a mixture of contraries and it had nothing common except blind prejudice and hatred against the Muslim League.⁸¹ To discredit the United Front, they alleged that it received a donation of Rs. one crore from Bharat. If the United Front succeeded in the elections it would be controlled by Bharatiers.⁸²

The two major factors by which the League had perhaps hoped to win elections were Eisenhower's announcement of U.S. military aid to Pakistan made on February 25, 1954 and Miss Fatima Jinnah's tour of East Pakistan in support of the Muslim League.⁸³ The Muslim League leaders thought that the people might vote for them

⁷⁹Morning News, March 2, 1954.

⁸⁰Islamic constitution and separate electorate were the pillars on which the League's election edifice was to be built. See M. Mahfuzul Huq, Electoral Problems in Pakistan (Asiatic Society, Pakistan, Dacca), 1966, p.61.

⁸¹According to them, a United Front victory would spell chaos for East Pakistan, inevitable political instability and possible Governor's rule for a long period of time. See, Morning News (Dacca), March 5, 1954.

⁸²They asked: who was financing the United Front? Did the fund come from some non-Muslim Textile Mill-owners? Some Marwari Jute businessmen? Some Hindu drug stores' owners? Or some Hindu Philanthropists? Why did Hindus take such a prominent part in the United Front rallies? Morning News, March 5, 1954. Also see, The Pakistan Review, Vol.II, No.4, April 1954, p.9.

⁸³see Dawn, March 1, 1954.

because of US aid which would make Pakistan strong and prosperous and would also give them a certain measure of economic relief. It was also felt that, being the Sister of Quaid-I-Azam, Miss Fatima Jinnah might be able to influence the voters in favour of the Muslim League.⁸⁴ But these were the day dreams of the Muslim League. They spent money like water. Almost the entire Central Cabinet and President of the Muslim League campaigned for the ruling Muslim League Party. The Constituent Assembly suspended its sittings so that the members could canvass votes. Ulemas took active part in the campaign. The official machinery was freely used for carrying out the Muslim League campaign. A number of Government officials unashamedly canvassed for the Muslim League. Many active workers, leaders and candidates of the United Front were arrested under the Public Safety Act or were involved in criminal cases.⁸⁵

The United Front, on the other hand, emphasised its programme and focussed attention on the failure of the Muslim League to ease the Cultural-economic political

⁸⁴ According to Sidney H. Seltzberg, the New York Times correspondent, the US Government hastened to make the announcement of military aid to Pakistan to help Prime Minister Mohammad Ali's Muslim League in the election in East Bengal.

Commentary (New York), June 1954. p.524. See M. Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., pp.127-128.

⁸⁵ Details see Morning News, March 14, 1954. Dawn March 1, 1954.

Pakistan Times, in its editorial, wrote: "The Public Safety Act is being prostituted in the interests of the Party in power; the press has been raided by mobs; opposition leaders have been attacked by holligans; official succour is being promised to the Muslim League candidates; and the ruling Party's election fund is being built up with the help of Govt. officials". Pakistan Times, March 1, 1954.

strangle hold of West Pakistan on East Bengal. Its three important leaders - Huq, Suhrawardy and Bhashani - toured the remotest parts of the province to mobilize support on its behalf. During their campaign, they also effectively countered the allegations brought against the United Front by the Muslim League. While referring to the allegation that the opposition was undermining the integrity of Pakistan, Suhrawardy said,

"To us the integrity of Pakistan is fundamental and we shall not tolerate - let alone forgive - anyone who disturbs its integrity. Whether the Centre should be all-powerful, should have only a few subjects of fundamental importance to handle, does not touch the all important fact viz., that Pakistan must remain one, and the two wings must remain linked together in one common destiny and as one political entity and a differences of opinion on the subject has nothing to do with the question of integrity."⁸⁶

As far as the election expenses of the United Front was concerned, the United Front leaders like Huq and Suhrawardy categorically stated that, far from receiving foreign aid, the Front was in financial difficulties and that it was able to carry on the election campaign because of the ungrudging help and assistance given by workers and the student community.⁸⁷ Suhrawardy accused the Muslim League Party for adopting repressive measures against the Front. He asked "Is it Islamic to detain a person without trial

⁸⁶ See the statement Morning News (Dacca) January 3, 1954.

⁸⁷ Details See Pakistan Times, March 13, 1954. Also The Statesman, March 18, 1954.

and to maintain high salaried posts when lakhs of people were starving and going without employment."⁸⁸

The strategy of the United Front leaders was to harp on the failure of the Muslim League administration in the economic and educational fields. They referred to the foreign exchange earnings of East Pakistani jute, which provided the Central Government with most of its dollar and pound revenues. The Muslim League Government however, had done nothing to ensure proper price for the jute. The prices of cash crops like cotton and jute had gone down tremendously whereas food prices shot up because of scarcity. The result was growing frustration among the jute growers of the province who produced about 70 per cent of the world's raw jute. Another important point which the United Front stressed was the language controversy. The language problem generated heat, roused passions and fomented anger against the Muslim League.⁸⁹ In fact, language issue was the one point which received tremendous applause and cheers from the audience. Wall posters containing the slogan

⁸⁸ Dawn, November 22, 1953.

⁸⁹ While the League stood committed to support Bengali before the constituent Assembly, the opposition wanted to get it declared as a State language immediately. Fazul Huq had in fact promised that should he come into power he would see that Bengali was declared a State language within seven days.

See Dawn March 8, 1954.

"Rashtra Bhasha, Bangla Chai" (wanted Bengali as a state language), and "Bengali as a State Language is our birth-right."⁹⁰ The issue of full autonomy for East Pakistan also figured prominently in the election campaign.⁹¹ Moulana Bhashani said that this election was going to be "a life and death struggle of the people of East Bengal for the achievement of self-determination on the basis of the historical Lahore resolution."⁹²

Besides the three top leaders, Bhashani, Huq & Suhrawardy campaign was carried on by local leaders, ordinary party workers, students and youths. The students and youth were against the Muslim League because of its mishandling of the language movement in 1952. The student community as a whole played an important part in the United Front campaign. The two main students' organisation of the province, the East Pakistan Students Union⁹³ and the East Pakistan Students League, combined to support the United Front candidates.⁹⁴ The students took up the 21-Point Programme and explained it to the people. The organised public meetings, and worked as

⁹⁰Pakistan Times, March 1, 1954.

⁹¹According to one writer, the feelings against the Centre were not so high in 1954. Regionalism as a political phenomena became more prominent at a subsequent stage. M. Rashi duzzaman, "The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan," Asian Survey, Vol. X, No. 7, July 1970, p.577.

⁹²Pakistan Times, December 10, 1953.

⁹³The East Pakistan Students Union was formed in 1953 by some members of the East Pakistan Students League which was working in cooperation with Awami League. The East Pakistan Students Union was with progressive movement.

⁹⁴M. Rashiduzzaman, "The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan," Op.cit., p.577.

volunteers and Polling agents for the United Front candidates. Other parties like Pakistan National Congress headed by P.P. Gomez, B.K. Das and B.K. Dutta, the United Progressive Party headed by K.K. Dutta, the scheduled castes Federation, East Pakistan Communist Party and a few smaller organisation also joined the United Front campaign. "Ittefaq" a popular Bengali Paper and mouth-piece of the Awami League played an important role in the United Front election campaign.⁹⁵

political Parties which contested the election had varying expectation of the election results. In the early stages of the campaign the Muslim League leaders claimed that it would win "with a thumping majority."⁹⁶ Prime Minister, Mohammed Ali of Bogra after his first election tour in January, 1954, was confident of a comfortable majority and indeed expected a walk over in the election.⁹⁷ But after his second election tour, realizing the remarkable shift in public opinion against the Muslim League, urged the people not to condemn the national organisation for faults of its leaders, asking them to change the party leadership

⁹⁵ 'Ittefaq' which used to be Weekly Paper edited by late Tafazzul Hossain, (better known as Manik Mia) had become a daily newspaper. Ittefaq, through its forceful editorial columns, raised political and economic issues.

⁹⁶ Dawn, December 13, 1953.

⁹⁷ Ibid., January 13, 1954.

instead.⁹⁸ The Muslim League, however, expected a majority of Muslim seats.⁹⁹ The United Front leaders too were not confident of their victory. They thought that the situation was not quite favourable.¹⁰⁰ Later on they said that there may be strong contest in 36 constituencies, thereby implying in the remaining 200 constituencies, the United Front would more or less walk over.¹⁰¹

This election was the first Post-partition general elections on the basis of adult franchise under separate electorates.¹⁰² There were altogether 1285

⁹⁸ Ibid., March 2, 1954. See M. Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., p.86. Nurul Amin was not quite happy over Mr. Mohammad Ali's frequent visits to East Pakistan because of his alleged hand in the anti-Nurul Amin group's attempts to make their position strong and secure by trying to give tickets to their followers. It may be also noted that Mohammad Ali made no reference whatsoever to the provincial League or Provincial administration in his speeches in Dacca. On the other hand, he admitted that the Muslim League leadership had been **guilty** of many acts of omissions and commissions. See Pakistan Times, January 20, 1954.

⁹⁹ Dawn, March 1, 1954.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Kamaruddin Ahmed who was in-charge of the United Front Election office.

¹⁰¹ Dawn, March 1, 1954. The popularity of the United Front could be gauged from what Arbad Muhammad Asif, a Peshwar M.L.A., who, after a tour in East Bengal, said that public meetings of United Front were attended by thousands, in some cases 20,000 to 30,000, while in the same places the Muslim League could either not hold a public meeting at all for want of attendance or with some hundreds, many of which belonged to the Police, the Ansars and officials. See Pakistan Times, February 11, 1954.

¹⁰² The electoral system was not an important issue in the election. Muslim League supported separate electorates, because they could make an exclusive appeal to the Muslim emphasizing their communal interests as against those of the Hindus and use religious issues to attract votes. United Front parties had divergent views on this matter. Therefore, they also did not make it an issue. Details see M. Mahfuzul Huq, Electoral Problems in Pakistan, Op.cit., pp.79, 82.

candidates for 304 seats (Details See Table-1). Five candidates had been returned unopposed. They included 3 nominees of the Pakistan National Congress, one Christian and one woman from a Scheduled Caste reserved constituency. Thus no Muslim candidate was returned unopposed. The total number of voters in contested constituencies was 19,7,48,565 (Details see Table-1). Nearly 40 per cent of the voters exercised their franchise.¹⁰³

Election Results

The verdict of the people of East Bengal was almost unanimous against the Muslim League and the Central Government. The United Front won a decisive victory by securing 223 seats in a House of 309 and obtained nearly 64 per cent of the votes. The distribution of 237 Muslim seats was as follows:¹⁰⁴

United Front	-	223
Muslim League	-	10
Independents	-	3
Khilafat-e-Robbani Party	-	1

The respective strength of the Parties within the United Front was as follows:¹⁰⁵

East Pakistan Awami		
Muslim League	-	143
Krishak Sramik Party	-	48
Nizam-i-Islam Party	-	19
Ganatantri Dal	-	13

¹⁰³ See Morning News, March 9, 1954. Also see Table-1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., April 4, 1954.

¹⁰⁵ Dawn, Oct. 20, 1954. Since the election, six seats in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly fell vacant. This was due to (1) the election of Fazlul Huq from two constituencies, (2) the result of disqualification of elected member for his failure to lodge the return of election expenses (3) the demise of 4 members elected.

See Report on the General Election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 1954, Op.cit., p.31.

TABLE - I
SUMMARY OF ELECTION TO THE EAST BENGAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, 1954

Class of Constituency	No. of Seats	No. of Seats filled without test	No. of candidates for contested seats	Total Electorate	No. of women voters	Total no. of voters in contested constituencies	No. of votes polled	Percentage of column 8 on column 7
1) Muslim	228	-	986	1,51,59,825	69,40,804	1,51,59,825	56,99,427	37.60
2) General	30	2	101	20,95,355	9,59,672	19,81,768	7,76,726	39.19
3) Scheduled Caste	36	-	151	23,03,578	10,55,569	23,03,578	7,66,245	33.26
4) Women's								
(1) Muslim	9	-	32	1,61,966	1,61,966	1,61,966	60,752	37.51
(2) General	1	1	-	25,726	25,726	-	-	Uncontested
(3) Scheduled caste	2	1	3	14,785	14,785	5,014	1,779	35.48
5) Pakistan Christian	1	1	-	43,911	20,526	-	-	Uncontested
6) Buddhist	2	-	12	1,36,417	60,872	1,36,417	39,287	28.80
TOTAL	309	5	1285	1,95,41,563	92,39,720	1,97,48,568	73,44,216	37.19

Source: Report on the General Elections to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly held in 1954. Government of East Bengal, Home Department, Constitution and Election, 25 February 1956, Dacca, Statement IV.

The distribution of the seventy-two non-Muslim seats was as follows:¹⁰⁶

Congress	-	24
Minority United Front	-	10
Ganatantri Dal	-	3
Communist Party of East Pakistan	-	4
Scheduled Caste Federation		27
Christian	-	1
Buddhist	-	2
Independents(caste Hindu)-		1

It gave a crushing defeat to the ruling Muslim League Party which won single digit number of seats - 9 and polled less than 27 per cent of the votes polled in the contested constituencies. The mighty elephant Nurul Amin, the Chief Minister and President of the East Pakistan Muslim League, was defeated by a young law graduate, Khaliq Nawaz, with a majority of over 7000 votes. All the ministers in the Muslim League Ministry were defeated. More than 66 of the 237 Muslim League candidates including one of the ministers S.A. Salim, forfeited their deposits. The Muslim League was able to form a party in the provincial Legislative assembly only when its membership increased to ten when an independent joined the Party, Fazlal Qadir Chowdhury.¹⁰⁷ Muslim League secured its seats mainly from some parts of North Bengal like Rangpur and Dinajpur. The Awami League lost

¹⁰⁶ Morning News, April 4, 1954.

¹⁰⁷ Rafique Afzal, Op.cit., p.128.

few seats in North Bengal because of the weakness of the Party organisation. Further they were the outlining districts, communications were difficult and election campaign was not effective.¹⁰⁸

The results of the 1954 East Bengal Election was interpreted differently by different persons. The Muslim League said that the opposition parties roused the passions of the people by making false charges against it by inaccurate statistics and by empty slogans. They also blamed the Central Government for having alienated the Eastern wing by their short-sighted and muddle-headed policies.¹⁰⁹ Although some of the points of 21-Point Programme appealed to the emotions of the people, the United Front, unlike Muslim League, fought the election on political and economic issues. The (Muslim League leader) had conveniently forgotten the fact that the Central Government was itself a Muslim League Government. Finally, they failed to take note of their own ineffectiveness to bring about a change in the policies of the Central Government.

The opposition interpreted the result as a revolt of the East Pakistanis against the West.¹¹⁰ It was the

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Zahiruddin, a prominent Awami League leader.

¹⁰⁹ K.K. Aziz, Party Politics in Pakistan, 1947-1958, Op.cit., p.72.

¹¹⁰ Abul Mansur Ahmad, Op.cit., p.260. Quoted by M. Rashiduzzaman.

verdict of an "oppressed", "persecuted", "neglected" and "economically discontented" people against the ruling Muslim League leadership.¹¹¹ It was a vote against the Muslim League and the wrong policies followed by its Government both at the Centre and in the Province.

The Pakistan Times, in a strong editorial, wrote: "Never before, in the history of Parliamentary strife, has the Party in Power suffered such an ignominious and decisive defeat; and never was such a nemesis so richly deserved."¹¹² It was also a vote for the United Front and its 21-Point Programme. Voting for a clear-cut socio-economic programme; the people of East Bengal had demonstrated their political consciousness.¹¹³ The Pro-Muslim League Bengali daily, 'Azad' listed the following reasons for the defeat of the Muslim League:

- 1) Refusal to make Bengali a state language and repressive measures taken by the Nurul Amin Government during the language movement;
- 2) Policy of the Government at the Centre towards East Pakistan - injustice, exploitation and absence of equity;
- 3) Centre's opposition to provincial autonomy;
- 4) Economic depression prevailing in the province;
- 5) Delay in framing the constitution;
- 6) Failure of the Muslim League to establish mass contact;

¹¹¹ Dawn, March 19, 1954.

¹¹² Pakistan Times, March 19, 1954.

¹¹³ C.B. Marshal writes: "Bengalis are apt at competitive politics. Political consciousness and communication are intense in East Pakistan. Regional cohesiveness in high....". "Reflection on a Revolution in Pakistan". Foreign Affairs, vol.37, No.2, 1959, p.253.

- 7) vesting the provincial Chief-Ministership and the Muslim League Presidentship in one and the same person;
- 8) Want of workers and hostile attitude of students and youth towards the Muslim League;
- 9) Lack of strong personality in the League; and
- 10) Failure of the League Government to root out corruption.¹¹⁴

The United Front led by three of Bengal's most prominent politicians - Huq, Bhashani and Suhrawardy - who represented the urges of the East Pakistanis middle class provided an alternative leadership to the Muslim League. This brought about a major shift in the public opinion which resulted in the defeat of the ruling Muslim League and the victory of the United Front which meant the emergence of a new Bengali leadership which was much more closely identified itself with the needs and demands of the masses. In fact, the people believed that this new leadership was genuinely aware of their problems and that the problems, if at all capable of solutions, could be solved only by them. In short, the growing political strength of the East Pakistani Middle class was demonstrated most clearly in the election.

The United Front victory had its repercussions at the centre too. The most striking aspect of the electoral verdict was that it was a vote for a change

¹¹⁴Dawn, March 25, 1954.

in the power structure of Pakistan dominated by West Pakistanis who showed utter disregard to the genuine needs and demands of the people of East Bengal. The consolidation of the political strength of the East Pakistani middle class which stood for regional autonomy threatened to strike at the root of central power and monopoly at Karachi. They wanted a new constitutional arrangement in which East Pakistan would enjoy the maximum financial and administrative autonomy. It was also clearly established that the so called representatives from the East Bengal Assembly to the Constituent Assembly were not the true representatives and had no right to represent East Bengal and much less to frame any constitution. East Bengal would not accept a constitution framed by them.¹¹⁵ In other words, the existing constituent Assembly should be dissolved and a new one should be elected on the basis of adult franchise.

The defeat of the Muslim League in the East Bengal Assembly elections shook the foundation of the Pakistan Government. Mohammad Ali of Bogra was a nominal Prime Minister. He was a prisoner in the hands of West Pakistan Muslim bureaucrats. East Pakistanis had no confidence in him. Therefore there was a demand that the central cabinet itself should be overhauled.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ See Suhrawardy's statement, Pakistan Times, March 28, 1954.

¹¹⁶ Dawn, March 25, 1954.

Another important consequence of the results of the East Bengal election was that it had generated a demand that there should be elections to all the legislative Assemblies in Pakistan.¹¹⁷ Khalifa Iman Din Baqa, Convener, Jinnah Awami League, in a statement said:

"The people of East Pakistan after giving a crushing defeat to the reactionary elements have inspired a new hope of prosperity and freedom, and will also have greatest effect on the morale of the people of West Pakistan."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷H. Khuhro, "Pakistan's Experiments in Democracy", In, Reform and Revolution in Asia, edited by G.F. Hudson, (London, 1972), p.202.

¹¹⁸Pakistan Times, March 23, 1954.