East Pakistan and the Creation of Bangladesh

The tensions between East and West Pakistan, the rise of the Awami League and Sheikh Mujib's Six Points, the 1970 elections, the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh.

East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh

Background

East Pakistan (formerly East Bengal) had **more people** (about **56%** of Pakistan) than **West Pakistan**, but was **1,600 km** away across India. It was **poorer**, with different **language**, **culture** and **customs**. In the early years it was the **jute** that earned most of the country's foreign exchange.

Causes of tension between East and West Pakistan

Area	Grievance
Language	the decision (1948) that **Urdu** alone would be the state language. The **Language Movement**: police fired on demonstrators at **Dhaka University** on **21 February 1952** (now **Language Martyrs' Day**); Bengali was recognised as a state language in **1954/1956**
Political	the Bengalis were the **majority** but were **under-represented** in the civil service and army (the army was **mostly Punjabi**). **Parity** in the **1956 Constitution** gave them equal seats with the West. **One Unit** (1955) merged the western provinces into one **to balance East Bengal**. The **Muslim League** was swept out of power in **East Bengal** in the **1954 elections** (to the **United Front**), but the central government **dismissed** the elected government (**Section 92A**). Military rule by **West Pakistani** generals (Ayub, Yahya) made it worse
Economic	**jute** (the main export) earned most foreign exchange, but **most spending** was in the **West**; the **East** had **less development**, **fewer industries**, and a **smaller share** of aid and investment. Bengalis felt **exploited** and spoke of "**two economies**"
Cultural/social	Bengali people felt **looked down on** by West Pakistanis; the **government** tried to remove Hindu influences from the Bengali language (for example in the script and poetry of **Tagore**)
Defence	during the **1965 war** with India, East Pakistan was **left undefended** (the army was in the West), so Bengalis felt **vulnerable**
Natural disaster	the **1970 cyclone** (November) killed several hundred thousand people. The slow response of the government angered the East

Note Academy

(There were also earlier problems over the **Partition of Bengal** in 1905: see chapter 6.)

Some figures often quoted: Bengalis made up only about **10% of the army** and about **15% of the central civil service** although they were the majority of the population. The East earned most of the country's foreign exchange from **jute**, but most development money and industry went to the West.

The rise of the Awami League

- Founded in **1949** as the **Awami Muslim League** (the word "Muslim" was dropped in **1955**) by **Maulana Bhashani**, with **H.S. Suhrawardy** as a leading figure. **Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman**, an early organiser, became the party's leader after Suhrawardy's death in **1963**.
- It campaigned for **provincial autonomy** and **Bengali rights**.
- **Mujib** was arrested several times, including in the **Agartala Conspiracy Case (1968)**, which alleged that he planned the secession of the East with Indian help. The case was **dropped** in **1969** after protests and he became a hero.

The Six Points (1966)

Sheikh Mujib presented them at a conference in **Lahore** in **February 1966**. They called for:

1. a **federal, parliamentary** government elected by **adult franchise**, with the Legislature sovereign;
2. the **federal government** to be responsible for **only defence and foreign affairs** (and all other subjects to the provinces);
3. **two separate currencies** (or one currency with measures to stop capital from flowing from East to West), and separate banking and financial reserves;
4. **taxation** to be collected by the **provinces**, with a part given to the centre;
5. **separate foreign exchange accounts** for East and West, and the East could make its own trade agreements;
6. a **separate militia or paramilitary force** for East Pakistan.

Why they were rejected. Ayub Khan and the West Pakistani leaders thought that they would **break up the country** (they amounted to **near independence** for the East) and were a threat to the **centre's** power; Mujib was **arrested**. Many Bengalis felt it was their only hope.

Sheikh Mujib and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

- **Mujib**: leader of the **Awami League**, the voice of **Bengali** nationalism.
- **Zulfikar Ali Bhutto**: a former Foreign Minister under Ayub, who formed the **Pakistan People's Party (PPP)** in 1967, with the slogan "**roti, kapra aur makan**". He was the main leader in the **West**.
- After the **1970 elections** the two leaders could not agree on how to share power.

Note Academy

The 1970 elections and the crisis of 1971

- The elections of **December 1970** were the **first on adult franchise**.
- **Result:** the **Awami League** won **160 of 162** seats in East Pakistan, giving it an **absolute majority** (**160 of 300**) in the National Assembly; the **PPP** won **81** seats in West Pakistan (mainly Punjab and Sindh).
- Mujib was entitled to form a government, but **Bhutto** refused to accept him as Prime Minister and demanded a share of power. **Yahya Khan postponed** the meeting of the Assembly (planned for **3 March 1971**) indefinitely.
- In the East, there were protests, **strikes** and a **civil disobedience movement**; Mujib's **7 March 1971** speech at Dhaka called for struggle.
- Talks failed. On **25 March 1971** the army launched **Operation Searchlight** in Dhaka to crush the movement, with many killed (estimates vary greatly) and arrests; **Mujib** was arrested and taken to West Pakistan. Independence was declared on **26 March 1971** in Mujib's name (it was broadcast by Major **Ziaur Rahman**).

The war and the role of India

- A guerrilla force, the **Mukti Bahini**, was formed. About **10 million refugees** fled to **India**. **India** gave them shelter and **trained and armed** the Mukti Bahini, and criticised Pakistan.
- Pakistan's army in the East was far from its supply bases and had **little local support**.
- In **December 1971** the **UN Security Council** debated the war, but ceasefire resolutions were **blocked by the Soviet veto**, and the USSR supported India.
- On **3 December 1971** Pakistan launched air attacks on Indian airfields, and a **full-scale war** began. The **Indian army** and the Mukti Bahini advanced into East Pakistan.
- On **16 December 1971 General A.A.K. Niazi** surrendered to the Indian General **Jagjit Singh Aurora** at **Dhaka**. About **90,000 or more** Pakistani soldiers and officials became **prisoners of war**. **Bangladesh** became an independent state.
- **West Pakistan:** the war ended on the western front too. **Yahya Khan** resigned and **Bhutto** became President (20 December 1971). He later recognised Bangladesh (1974).

Why Pakistan's army lost. The East was **1,600 km** from the West with hostile India between, so supplies and reinforcements could not arrive; most local people were **against** the army, and the Mukti Bahini gave India information and help; India had **Soviet support** while Pakistan got little active help from the USA or China; and the UN could not stop the war.

After the war. Mujib was released in **January 1972** and became Prime Minister of Bangladesh (later President); he was killed in a coup in **August 1975**.

Note Academy

Why did East Pakistan seek independence?

Reason	Detail
long-term grievances	language, economic neglect, little political power, cultural difference
the military governments	made Bengalis feel they were a colony
the Six Points rejected, **Mujib arrested**	denied autonomy
the election result ignored	the **immediate cause** of the revolt
army action (Operation Searchlight)	turned autonomy into a demand for **independence**
India's help	decisive in winning the war

> TRY IT
>
> What roles did Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman and the Awami League play in the independence movement?

Outline. Mujib led the **Awami League**, which championed Bengali **autonomy** (Six Points), won the **1970 election**, and led civil disobedience in March 1971; the League's call became **independence**; Mujib was arrested but became the **symbol** (Bangabandhu, "Friend of Bengal"), and the Mukti Bahini fought in his name. **Judgement:** central, though the **army action**, **Bhutto–Yahya** decisions and **India** also decided the outcome.

Note Academy