

SUCCESS OF BENGALI SEPARATIST MOVEMENT: AN ASSESSMENT OF AYUB KHAN'S LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

General Muhammad Ayub Khan had been one of the most influential leaders of Pakistan during fifties and sixties. These two decades witnessed the Bengali Movement in East Pakistan developing gradually to a successful separatist movement. Being the most powerful personality in the ruling circles Ayub Khan could play the most vital role in appeasing that movement. Whether he was able to assess the challenge of rising separatism and how his policies, politics and actions affected the Bengali movement are the major questions which have been addressed in this paper. The paper deals with the critical appraisal of the performance of Ayub Khan as Commander in Chief (C-in-C) of Pakistan army as well as the president of Pakistan in connection with gradually rising separatism in East Pakistan. Achievements and failures of Ayub Khan in respect of this most grave challenge to the state of Pakistan have been criticised in this paper. The analysis is based on the primary sources like documents from archives, diaries, autobiographies and biographies as well as secondary sources like books and articles in journals.

Key Words: Leadership, East Pakistan, Separatism, Politics, Movement

General Ayub Khan – An Administrator

Born of a family of landed gentry of Pathan stock, educated at Muslim University Aligarh and Sandhursht, Ayub was commissioned in the Indian army in 1928. He was promoted Colonel early in 1947 and appointed president of a Services Selection Board. In December 1948 he was promoted Major-General as GOC East Pakistan. In late 1949 he was appointed Adjutant General and in 1950 Lieutenant General and C-in-C designate. In 1951 he was promoted General as first Pakistani C-in-C (UKHC Pakistan, October 1963). He was the most influential personality in the ruling circle of Pakistan after the death of Liaquat Ali Khan.

Ayub Khan was an efficient administrator but was not a popular leader (Akbar, p. 43). He became increasingly adept in political manoeuvring but was powerful as an administrator rather than as a charismatic leader (US Embassy Rawalpindi, 1967). He also lacked charisma (Ziring, 1998, p. 180) that is key component of a charismatic leader. He could not be called a contextual leader because though he was imbued with a burning desire to reform society and put the country on the road to progress (Dad, 2001, p. 65), he was in fact more fallible than

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he seemed. He could not gather people around him as a political leader does and he ran what was virtually a one-man show. As a ruler he made little demand – and gave little time – for previous research or examination of likely consequences (James, 1993, pp. 108-09).

Responsible for Instability as Commander-in-Chief

As C-in-C before imposing martial law Ayub Khan was fully involved in political affairs and thus was responsible for bad impacts of political instability at Centre on East Pakistan and mishandling of Bengali Movement during that period. He, days before the dismissal of Khawaja Nazimuddin, strongly urged on Zafrullah Khan the need for immediate action to remedy the position as Khawaja Nazimuddin 'had lost confidence of army' (UKHC in Pakistan to CRO). He had already struck an alliance with Ghulam Muhammad before the dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. He took Chaudhuri Muhammad Ali into confidence and told him that he had been offered the Prime Ministership by the Governor General Ghulam Muhammad (Khan, 1974, p. 296). He had preferred to become the Defence Minister instead of accepting the request by the Governor General for assuming the control through Martial Law (Note on Ayub Khan, , October 1963).

Evidently under Governor General Ghulam Muhammad, Ayub Khan's influence was all pervasive. "His opinion was sought in matters which were strictly speaking not his concern. His counsel was obtained before any big or vital decision was taken by the government and it did not matter whether the action was concerned with commerce or education, foreign affairs or interior, industrial development or social welfare (Salamat, 1992, p. 29). The dissolution of the CAP, the formation of the 'Cabinet of Talents', the integration of West Pakistan into one unit were all part of the blueprint prepared by Ayub Khan in early 1954 (Khan, 1967, pp. 186-91). Moreover, as C-in-C he considered East Pakistan indefensible and visualized that its defence lay in West Pakistan (Afzal, 2001, p. 113).

As President of Pakistan

President Ayub had an excellent opportunity to solve many of the problems of disintegration. He possessed a towering personality, had the total support of the armed forces and was well acquainted with East Bengal having served there as the general officer commanding of the local army formation. But he did not prove equal to the task. His

priorities went wrong (Matinuddin, 1994, p. 65). According to Qudratullah Shahab who was his Secretary, Ayub's ten years of rule did not help Pakistan to develop any institution which could be a source of strength to Pakistan in the era after him. The 1962 Constitution, the BD system, the ConML, all succumbed to their natural death immediately after Ayub's exit (Dad, 2001, pp. 65-66).

Feldman (2001, p. xiv) regards Ayub as much more able than Yahya but nonetheless holds him substantially largely responsible for the dissolution of Pakistan. He says that "history may well conclude that it was Yahya Khan's misfortune to have completed what Ayub Khan had launched." Likewise Fazal Muqeem (n.d., p. 7) views Ayub as being inadvertently responsible for strengthening the secessionist forces within East Pakistan. Shahid Hamid (1993, p. 205) believes the imposition of Martial Law in 1958 and the abrogation of the 1956 Constitution as Ayub Khan's most serious errors. Despite all the Ayub's concessions to opinion and his harder efforts to merit the goodwill of the East Pakistan than his predecessors, his martial law was seen as the further humiliation of East Pakistan. The return to civil government allowed the discontents to find expression and no really effective voice was raised on behalf of the president to allay and counter them (UKHC Pakistan to Secretary of State CRO, 1962-63).

Though the genuine and nationwide sense of relief felt in those days of political turmoil and unrest, yet later, because of being corrupted by power, proved that he was unequal to the necessities of his mission (Feldman, 2001, pp. 315-16). More than weakening the political parties generally through a ban on them, Feldman views that the ML, sole political party in the country which could reasonably claim to be equally well based in each wing, had been driven by Ayub Khan into two competing parties. Opportunists and turncoats filled ruling faction of ML's ranks which never could become an organized party and weak PML factions ultimately at the time of test could save neither Ayub Khan nor Pakistan and they deserted Ayub Khan when he was confronted by a political crisis (Dad, 2001, pp. 65-66; Hamid, 2001, p. 202).

The selection of Karachi as the capital of Pakistan was not appreciated by the Bengalis. People of East Pakistan had silently accepted the setting up of the Capital there only on the emotional ground

that the father of the nation had decided upon it. Ayub Khan's decision to shift the capital from Karachi to Islamabad freshly created an issue by reopening a very vital question which had been closed. It functioned as one of the factors in the alienation of the Bengalis. The Bengalis objected to the huge expenditure on the construction of new capital city. The cost of the estimated plan was 200 crore rupees. They were also averse to the cold weather of Islamabad because it was not bearable for them. They maintained if the Capital was at all to be shifted from Karachi, there was no reason why it should not have been Dhaka (UKHC Karachi, 1960.).

The planners, in the very start, could measure the possible dissatisfaction and criticism in East Pakistan. Suhrawardy as PM had abandoned a proposal of establishment of capital at Gadap near Karachi holding the view that it would be immoral to undertake such an ambitious plan "when the stupendous rehabilitation problem was still staring the country in the face." Ayub, on the contrary, without considering bad impacts on East Pakistan, not only endeavoured to construct new capital but also, as Sir Symon had strong impression that, had already made up his mind as to where the capital city would be and favoured a place in the foothills just above Jehlum (Symon, 1959). For the satisfaction of Bengalis the government announced for developing a second or subsidiary capital in East Pakistan (Information Department GOP, 1959) only when the representatives of East Pakistan, finding the decision imminent, proposed for a subsidiary capital in Dhaka (UKHC Karachi, 1959).

Abrogation of Constitutions

Ayub Khan twice took part in abrogating the constitution, an element that developed the separatism in East Pakistan. He, in 1954 as C-in-C, supported Ghulam Muhammad, to dissolve the CAP. If he had restricted himself to the sphere of his profession, it would have been far better for him as well as for the nation. He could have saved Pakistan from the evils and intrigues of Iskandar Mirza by preserving the constitution and ushering in an era of democracy. But it was very unfortunate day for Pakistan when they became close friends and later on hatched a heinous conspiracy against the people of Pakistan (Bhurgari, 2002, p. 116). In 1958 he with the help of army abrogated the constitution of Pakistan 1956, which was promulgated after a sort of consent with major elements of East Pakistan.

Again for making the new constitution after martial law, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) towards the end of July 1961 cautioned him that a good deal of the political and other activities would depend on the form of the future constitution. IB also warned him that the people in East Pakistan would not be satisfied unless the constitution ensured them in reality equal and effective participation in the government, equal share of development resources and particularly full control over the administration of East Pakistan. The intelligentsia would also like to see a directive principle in the constitution to increase speedily East Pakistan's share in the defence services as well as equal representation of East Pakistanis in the central services" (Gauhar, 1998, pp. 186-87). However, the constitution he produced assured East Pakistanis that they had the least chance of securing political power (Muqem, n.d., p. 7).

Awareness from Challenge

Notwithstanding being fully aware of the East Pakistani preference for a parliamentary and not a presidential system he viewed that only latter form could insure Pakistan's unity. "If East Pakistan wants to have a Parliamentary form of Government and [in West Pakistan] somebody else wants to have something else, really you have got to have two countries then!" was his view (Ziring, 1998, p. 27).

Ayub Khan (1960, p. 549) knew the gravity of challenge of separatism in East Pakistan. He believed that "due to the uniqueness of the ideological state of Pakistan, under normal circumstances, it would have required most extraordinary efforts by the best of governments to cope with the problems" confronting it. Ayub regime cited national disintegration as most important rationale for the coup d'état of October 1958. Feldman (The Herbert Feldman Omnibus: The End & the Beginning, 2001, p. 14) alleges that in the speeches and writings of Ayub Khan there was nothing to show that any of these problems of disintegration of Pakistan's two wings worried him. While Safdar Mahmood (1989, p. 28) thinks that Ayub Khan knew the sentiments of the Bengalis and attached great importance to the problem of national integration. He consulted educationists and psychologists to devise means to integrate the two regions.

Ayub Khan thought the unity of both the parts as the guarantee for the sovereignty and freedom of both. He felt that separated, it might

be a matter of a few years if not a few months, before they disappear, disintegrate, or are destroyed” (Ziring, 1998, p. 28). Over-emphasis on the separation-demand by Ayub Khan is also deemed a major mistake by him. There can be no better and stronger proof than Jilani’s writing who was eyewitness to everything happening in East Pakistan. It proves that Bengalis did not want separation, but it was forced upon them by Ayub (Bhurgari, 2002, p. 311).

Ayub Khan was conscious of the smouldering discontent but the measures he took to develop and promote understanding between the people of the two wings were frustrated due to wrong planning and nepotism. Most of the inter-wing scholarships were not awarded to deserving students. Besides, the exchange of cultural and student delegations bred misunderstandings because the delegations visited big cities only and went back with the impression that West Pakistan was much more developed than East Pakistan. The posting of West Pakistani officers also generated ill-feeling because their attitude towards the local people was indifferent and they treated them as a race apart. Ayub Khan’s idea of inter-wing marriages did not produce the desired result because of linguistic and cultural differences. The Pakistan Councils for National integration set up to remove language barrier and create understanding became centres of Bengali nationalism (Mahmood, 1989, p. 30).

Bias to Bengalis

Ayub Khan’s bias towards Bengali people and Bengalis’ contempt towards him left bad impacts on East Pakistan. Not conversant with Bengali language, short of limited personal contact with Bengali politicians and academics Ayub Khan must have appeared distant and alien to the people of East Pakistan (Gauhar, 1998, p. 186). They hated him in the same manner. In December 1967, an unsuccessful attempt was made to kidnap and assassinate him in East Pakistan (Gauhar, 1998, pp. 408-09). He himself had drawn a racial distinction with the West Pakistanis the ‘conquering race and the East Pakistanis, the ‘downtrodden’ race (Khan, 1967, p. 187). He also said once that the Bengali Muslims’ support of Jinnah’s demand for the establishment of Pakistan was based on a negative attitude. He stereotypically continued that the Bengalis were noted for a negative and destructive attitude rather than for hard work and constructive programmes; they also have a

tremendous tendency to put the blame on others (Choudhury, 1973, p. 10).

Look at Ayub Khan's views about Bengalis in his diary. "Any normal people should have recognized and rejoiced at this blessing (of providing them freedom and equality of status by Ayub), but they and their politicians and so-called intelligentsia show no realization of this. Instead, they urge to fall back on their Bengali past....In addition, they have cut themselves off from Muslim culture" (Baxter, 2008, p. 210). In the light of these views Ayub Khan was certain that the day was not far off when the Bengalis would secede. He disclosed to Altaf Gauhar (1998, p. 411) once that "I gave them the second capital because they are going to need it one day. They are not going to remain with us." In March 1964 he told Khawaja Khairuddin (in the presence of Monem Khan, Governor East Pakistan) that the Bengalis had no culture and could not govern themselves. He wished to rule them through certain West Pakistan families long established in Bengal, such as Khawaja Khairuddin's (1965).

It was during Ayub Khan's administration that, despite his own efforts to meet some, if not all, of East Pakistan's grievances, Bengali Movement acquired firm shape. It was during his administration that the word secession became, in Pakistan, not only utterable, but printable. Ayub Khan failed as explicitly in East Pakistan because his regime became more intolerable, more oppressive and more corrupt without providing any material benefits to the deprived masses (Feldman, 2001, p. 189).

Response to Bengali Movement

Ayub's response to the Bengali movement was two-fold; to give economic relief to the middle class and to replace the established traditional Bengali political leadership with a host of new leaders decorated with patriotic sentiments. In 1962, Ayub Khan accused the Awami League leader H.S. Suhrawardy and others of inciting the students and the people of the region; as such he ordered for crushing those elements (Bhurgari, 2002, p. 110). The public meetings of NDF leaders organized at Lahore and Gujranwala to mobilize public opinion were disrupted by the police and its hirelings. The press, a substantial segment of which had been brought under direct government control,

was used to discredit the National Democratic Front as communist-inspired and subversive (Zaheer, 1994, p. 82).

So far as the accommodation of Bengali demands is concerned, Ayub's views seemed to undergo some changes over the years. While in 1954 he had regarded autonomy for East Pakistan as the best policy for national integration after 1958 he looked upon this solution as "disruptive" and "secessionist" and advocated a strong central government, preferably unitary (Jahan, 1972, p. 66).

Ayub apparently failed to grasp at an early point the force of the Bengali movement (US Embassy Rawalpindi, 1967). His response was short-sighted, even in terms of his own survival. The government machinery projected the Six Points to discredit the entire opposition, which included a large number of moderate and liberal elements. Ayub failed to comprehend the threat to the federal structure posed by the Six Points. Instead of building national consensus to neutralize and accommodate the regional demands within the federal system, he resorted to the usual techniques of the detention of opposition leaders of both East and West Pakistan, a media campaign questioning their patriotism, and placing restrictions on their activities (Zaheer, 1994, p. 97).

Ayub Khan's response to the AL's militant nationalism was detention and prosecution of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and some other leaders under various laws, at frequent intervals, and generally restricting their activities (Zaheer, 1994, p. 84). If Ayub Khan had sought to accommodate and co-opt Mujib, the separatist movement could have been weakened in the beginning (Zahid, 1984, p. 54). After abortive effort to contain the Six Point agitation by a process of detention and arrests under the Defence of Pakistan Penal Rule, the East Pakistan Safety Ordinance or the Pakistan Penal Code, along with censorship of the Press, Ayub Khan changed tactics. During September 1966 a rumour spread that secret negotiations between Ayub Khan's representatives, and leaders of AL, were in train. A long, circumstantial, and seemingly accurate account of these parleys appeared in the Dhaka weekly, *Holiday*, in its issue dated 12 September 1966. The attempt did not succeed but some useful contact appeared to have been made and it seems that Ayub Khan had concluded that the time was ripening for other more effectively persuasive measures. In December 1966 he again

visited East Pakistan where, it is said, he succeeded in weaning away some of Mujib's supporters and in cutting the Six Points campaign down to manageable proportions by a lavish distribution of import licences and the money-spinning favours. Ayub's next visit to use the same tactic in March 1967 could not be fruitful. During and after that visit Ayub gave strong statements against autonomy saying it was a "camouflage for separation" (Feldman, 2001, pp. 194-195). Ayub, however, acted with finesse when on his own initiative, Tafazzal Hossain was released in 1967. This was interpreted as a conciliatory move by the President for opening a dialogue with the AL (Humayun, 1995, p. 285).

Almost all the prominent East Pakistani politicians publicly rejected the Six Points but Ayub Khan did not try to enlist their support. Instead of winning over these moderate autonomists, he rejected their demands in Toto and drove them to take a more radical stand on autonomy. Ayub failed to foresee the coming events. He probably thought that the Six Point programme would ultimately go against Mujib and his followers. Moreover, knowing that the opposition parties would not support the Six Points, Ayub planned to create rift in the opposition political parties by projecting Mujib's formula. He, therefore, gave great publicity to the Six Points through "Trust Papers" with a view to proving him a secessionist and an Indian agent. But this ill-conceived scheme, bereft of tact and political wisdom, indirectly contributed to Mujib's popularity (Mahmood, 1989, p. 46). In 1967 Ayub was confused and uncertain of what to do in respect of separatist movement. His problem was one of public relations as much as substance – to persuade the East Pakistanis that despite the fact that the country was run by a West Pakistani they were getting a fair deal (Barrington, 1967).

While touring East Pakistan in September 1968, Ayub Khan announced a four-point plan 'to thwart disruption'. It comprised propagation of the legacy of Pakistan struggle; confirmation of Islamic ideology as the basis of Pakistan; projection of the urgency and benefits of a strong centre and the forging of a common front everywhere against the forces of disruption. The implementation of this plan was not marked by any great show of vigour and if it was intended to bring the two Provinces closer together it cannot be said that it was pursued with any real determination. In fact it more or less died through lack of interest

(Feldman, 2001, p. 200).

Towards the end Ayub Khan came to the dismal conclusion that there was nothing to hold the country together except the fear of the Hindu. The best thing, he thought, was to 'let East Pakistan go' and give the other provinces the maximum autonomy they wanted. (Gauhar, 1998, p. 490). Even the last act of Ayub Khan, the resignation, proved disastrous for solidarity of Pakistan. Dobell (1969, p. 310) remarks, "Even the efficacy of Ayub Khan's final act of self-sacrifice has been called into question." A large number of ills of Pakistan, as well as the separation of East Pakistan, can be attributed to him because he, as president for long eleven years, ran the country autocratically through official mechanism only with the advice and help of establishment (Barrington, 1967).

Conclusion

General Ayub Khan led Pakistan as ruler during critical years when this state was facing the most dangerous challenge to its integrity. As C-in-C of Pakistan army, very powerful institution in Pakistan, he interfered in the political matters and shared the responsibility of damages to the political system. Though his policies as president of Pakistan got praise at that time, he was responsible for the weaknesses of political parties which could establish strong political connection between two wings of Pakistan. His abrogating of constitutions twice blocked the constitutional development in Pakistan that heightened the separatism. Though he was able to assess the challenge in start, yet his response to the Bengali movement – economic relief to the middle class and replacement of traditional Bengali leadership – failed to integrate Pakistan. The imbalanced economic growth during his times heightened discontent in the East Pakistan. He tried to snub the movement through use of force and did not co-opt Bengali leadership that increased separatist tendencies. Therefore, it was he who was responsible for the separation of East Pakistan more than any other leader of Pakistan though the incident took place after almost two years of his resignation from the presidency.

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