**1971: A Personal Account of the Year Pakistan Broke Apart (Part III)**

[Akbar Ahmed](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/akbar-ahmed/)

April 21, 2022

On arrival in Karachi, I tracked down General Yaqub who was living under a cloud and there was talk of court-martial. His house was watched but I went straight in and asked to see him. He entered the drawing-room and greeted me warmly. His first words were, “How long do we have?” “Six to eight months,” I replied. He sat down as if I had hit him. “What is your reasoning?” he asked. “Mainly because the Pakistan army has been trained to fight conventional battles on the plains of Punjab not guerrilla warfare in the rain-sodden lowlands and deltas of Bengal,” I replied. He looked sombre.

In Islamabad, as I was staying with my school friend Tahir Ayub Khan, the son of Ayub Khan, I took the opportunity to call on his father and update him on the unfolding crisis. President Khan was not well but still came to the living room, wearing a dressing gown and carrying a book, as he always did, to see me. His Sandhurst training lingered, and as I was leaving Maaji gently said he wanted me to have my long hair cut. I headed straight for a barbershop.

President Ayub Khan was right. Though watching the 1971 crisis from Islamabad, as a field marshal of the Pakistan Army, he had spotted what for me, a junior assistant commissioner in the field in East Pakistan that year, was glaringly obvious: no nation could fight on two fronts and hope to win. After the military action against the Bengalis, he saw little hope.

Ayub Khan was reflective. He said something that struck me: He didn’t really know the younger officers as he was out of touch. I recalled that he had been away from the army effectively for over a decade. That is why he was able to give a detached picture of the global landscape and was yet unaware of the men running the army. He appeared baffled why they would be making one of the most fundamental strategic miscalculations any army could make of fighting on two fronts.

In contrast to Ayub Khan, West Pakistani officials were not appreciating the scale of the crisis. They were in denial. There were even celebrations cheering on the military action, and people were gleeful that the Bengalis were being taught a lesson. The crudest abuse was heaped on the Bengalis. They were called “black bastards” or bingos, the equivalent of the “n-word” for African Americans. For simply arguing for justice and human rights for Bengalis, my wife and I were sarcastically referred to as “Bingo-lovers.”

For simply arguing for justice and human rights for Bengalis, my wife and I were sarcastically referred to as “Bingo-lovers.”

One of my batch mates who was also an assistant commissioner in the field recounted how he barely escaped after hiding at the bottom of an ordinary boat. He had taken a revolver with him with one bullet in it. The bullet he said was for himself in case he was captured. When we finally met up in Rawalpindi in the Establishment Secretary’s office, he recounted his dramatic tale. Our senior colleague was not impressed. He said to get back right now to your posts. He had not shown the slightest interest in our arguments about the situation in the field.

One day in Dacca as I sat in my large, lonely office in an old colonial building from the British days behind a large desk with little to do I was visited by a friend. It was Major Sabir Kamal. He had a grim look on his face and was in full uniform with his revolver prominently displayed around his waist. As he walked toward me he pulled out his revolver and cocked it. Walking around the table, he placed the barrel of the revolver against my forehead and said, I want you to write a letter to the Chief Secretary. Annoyed and alarmed, I said, ‘don’t be silly, that damn thing could go off. “Sabir replied I am more concerned for your life. You must ask for a long leave and get out of East Pakistan before it is too late. The way things are going, we will all be killed. I explained to him patiently as he appeared distraught that I had no intention of writing that letter. I belonged to the CSP cadre, and we were trained to be in position whatever the circumstance. Besides, I said, if things were so bad how come you are still here. Somewhat grimly, he said he had made an arrangement. He had married a general’s daughter and was being posted to the Pakistan foreign service to a European country. The encounter made me think, but there was no way I would leave my post at this critical time. Yet I had a blind faith that somehow it would be alright in the end.

It was an irony of fate that my dear sincere, intelligent, and courageous friend Sabir who had cared so much for me was unable to save himself in the end. Just a short while after we met, when war came, he was posted in the northern districts. His Frontier Force regiment was surrounded by Indian troops supported by armour. Infantrymen cannot stand against tanks, but Sabir and his men fought like tigers. The Indian commander took the loudspeaker and yelled to Sabir to compliment him on his courage, but said you are now surrounded and there is no way you can escape. He asked Sabir to surrender to avoid further bloodshed. Sabir refused and in the fight that followed lost his life. He was nominated for Pakistan’s highest military award for valour. I wrote a poem in his honour, which I sent to his family and regiment. It was called, “Major Sabir Kamal, the last stand.”

In the summer when the Bengali uprising had built up widespread momentum and the security forces desperately tried to check it, General Tikka Khan, the newly appointed MLA asked for the file with West Pakistanis CSPs available to him. We formed a small group. At random the MLA, who I never met before or after, ticked my name, and I was appointed as Deputy Secretary to the Chief Secretary. As the latter was a Bengali, I suspect I was appointed to counterbalance his ethnicity. It was a position of great power and it allowed me to help those people in distress and seeking justice. For example, the young aristocratic couple from Dacca was harassed by a West Pakistani officer, demanding access to the wife, threatening to arrest the father of the husband and accusing him of being a “miscreant”. I advised them to go to Karachi to their relatives and got them coveted seats on the next PIA flight against the two seats allocated to my office. Similarly, I diverted a terrible fate that awaited my previous CSP Bengali boss from my time at Kishorganj who was accused of being a possible “miscreant.” 30 years later when I saw him at a White House iftar dinner given by President Bush as the Bangladesh Ambassador, we greeted each other warmly. He invited me several times to his house always giving me the place of honour at the dining table on his right hand. We never spoke of 1971.

During that summer I was invited for dinner to the military mess in honour of the new commander General Niazi. I noticed I was the only civilian there. The General was holding forth so I asked him how he would face the Indian attack when it came. Acutely aware of the political situation I listened to his answer intently. The military officers also listened intently but observing protocol agreed with everything they were hearing. I then added what would happen if East Pakistan was cut off from West Pakistan, which would be the primary objective of the Indian army. The general stared at me and asked, “haven’t you heard of the Niazi Corridor Theory?” No, I replied baffled and muttered something about making a break from the northern districts of East Pakistan towards the Chinese border, which was not far. “No, No,” the General replied with a flourish. “I will march my troops from East Pakistan down to Calcutta and then along the Ganges towards West Pakistan and West Pakistani troops will march towards my troops, and we will meet up and establish an open corridor.” Believing this was humour, I smiled only to realize that he was deadly serious as were the nodding officers around us.

That night I knew we were in deep trouble. I began to realize that the senior West Pakistani civil servants I met were attempting to make contingency plans in case the entire structure of the state collapsed and before they were captured by Indian troops. I thought of my friend Sabir Kamal.

Later in the year, Mr Malik, a civilian Governor, was appointed to head East Pakistan. Gentle and scholarly, he was the father of a schoolfellow who arranged for me to have dinner at the governor’s house with his father. While I talked about arranging for us to be repatriated to West Pakistan, the governor argued that he needed officers like me to stay for several years longer. Indeed, after dinner, he wrote to the government of Pakistan suggesting that officers like me should be posted for long period to ensure the unity of the nation. My dinner had backfired. This was literally on the eve of the breakup of Pakistan. It was clear that the senior officials of Pakistan had little idea of the existentialist crisis that Pakistan was facing.

By now the Bengali chief secretary had been replaced by a West Pakistani CSP officer and I noted that he had started making frequent trips to West Pakistan on the slightest pretext. Unfortunately for him, the wheel turned against him and as he returned to Dacca just when the war had started between India and Pakistan and all flights were cancelled. He was captured as an Indian prisoner of war.

For me to be posted back to Peshawar, Mr Sufi, the Establishment Secretary, had to visit Bangkok and meet my parents who explained the plight of my batch of civil servants. Sufi had to fly back to Islamabad via Dacca and have time to walk down to my office and chat with me. It gave me the crucial half-hour to explain our position. Bless him, on his return he prepared and moved the file to return us to our home provinces. The process to post us back had started and it would wind its leisurely way through the labyrinthine corridors of the bureaucracy until the orders were issued to each one of us. I received the orders in late November just when I arrived in Karachi.

Another crucial step in getting me out was to be given leave which I obtained after pleading with the Chief Secretary in Dacca to allow me to see my wife and mother in Karachi. Reluctantly I was allowed leave and I had bought my tickets for the return flight from Karachi to Dacca. Almost immediately on arrival war had begun between India and Pakistan and all flights were cancelled.

I was clear to return to Peshawar safe and sound. We took the train from Karachi to Peshawar. Along the way, we saw bombed out buildings and railway tracks. There was an air of desolation and uncertainty hanging over everything. But also, one of defiance. The war led to the fall of Dacca and the collapse of Pakistan which lost its majority province. The image of General Niazi surrendering to the Indian General in Dacca along with almost a hundred thousand troops still evokes pain and humiliation in many Pakistanis. That was the darkest day of Pakistan’s history. The loss of East Pakistan was a devastating blow for Pakistan as it challenged the very basis of its creation.

The writer is the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, School of International Service, American University, and Wilson Center Global Fellow, Washington DC. He was the former Pakistan High Commissioner to the UK and Ireland and in 1970-1, he was Assistant Commissioner in East Pakistan.

*The writer is Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, School of International Service, American University and author of The Flying Man: Philosophers of the Golden*   
*Age of Islam*