**From Agartala to the fall of Dhaka - PART-I**

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A lot has been written and discussed since December 16, 1971, yet the debate continues on whether Sheikh Mujibur Rahman aspired to become the Prime Minister of a united Pakistan or an independent Bangladesh. This article is an attempt to shed some light on this contested question and let the readers decide for themselves. On February 23, 2011, the deputy speaker of parliament Mr Shawkat Ali, who was one of the accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, told parliament that the charges brought against the accused were not false. “The charges against us read out on the first day of hearing in the case were absolutely right. We formed a Sangram Parishad led by Bangabandhu to free East Pakistan through armed protest.”

On January 6, 1968, the government of Pakistan declared that 28 out of a total of 35 criminals had been arrested on the charge of conspiring to secede East Pakistan and declare independence. The accused, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had visited the town of Agartala in India near the border with East Pakistan to discuss plans for secession with Indian intelligence officers at the behest of Indira Gandhi. During the June trial, all conspirators including Mujibur Rahman pleaded not guilty of plotting to deprive Pakistan of its sovereignty by an armed revolt with weapons, ammunition and funds provided by India. In East Pakistan, trouble started when Mujib’s name was announced as an accomplice in the conspiracy since he was in prison and people questioned how he could participate in the conspiracy if he was in prison. These suspicions grew stronger over time since the Pakistani government did not offer any convincing explanation. Agartala case’s initiation led to a dire situation in East Pakistan with strikes and civil disobedience. Faced with a mass opposition movement, the Pakistan government was ultimately compelled to withdraw the Agartala Conspiracy Case on February 22, 1969. Mujib and his other co-accused conspirators were released. Following these events, the Central Students Action Council of the Awami League arranged a reception on February 23, 1969 at a racecourse in Dhaka, where over one million loyal attendees flocked and conferred Mujib with the epic title of ‘Bangabandhu’—a friend of Bengal. Since Ayub’s regime failed to quell the uprisings and create stability in the nation, on March 26, 1969, the commander-in-chief of the Pakistani armed forces, General Yahya Khan, put martial law into effect, bestowing upon himself the title of chief martial law administrator. Four days after putting martial law into effect, General Yahya Khan revoked the Constitution of 1962 and declared himself the new (third) president of Pakistan.

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On March 30, 1970, President Yahya promulgated a Legal Framework Order (LFO), which constituted breaking up the ‘one unit’ of West Pakistan and reconstituting the original four provinces, i.e., Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh and NWFP. A national assembly was to be constituted that would be divided between East Pakistan and the four western provinces, the former receiving a larger proportion of seats because of its greater population. LFO articulated five principles as the basis of the upcoming elections in Pakistan: That Pakistan must be based on Islamic ideology; Pakistan was to have a democratic constitution providing for free elections. Pakistan’s territorial integrity must be upheld in the Constitution; disparity (between East and West Pakistan) must be eliminated in a specific period of time; maximum autonomy must be granted (to provinces) in the Constitution with adequate powers for the federal government to discharge its responsibilities, including preserving the country’s integrity; the Constitution was to be framed (by the newly elected national assembly) within 120 days. The president had the right to authenticate or reject it. During the election campaign of the 1971 elections, Mujib’s task was ingenious and easy compared to that of other political leaders in Pakistan. His only manifesto was the exploitation of Bengal by the West Pakistanis, and his promise was that of a sonar (golden) Bengal. This was the most popular appeal to a poverty-stricken populace of 75 million. The only condition was to give him and his party support and votes in the upcoming elections. Another important undertaking was the understanding and agreement between Mujib and Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani aka Maulana Bhashani that he and his party would boycott the elections so that Mujib could sweep elections in East Pakistan. Due to the virtual lack of opposition, the Awami League got a landslide victory in the general elections, winning 160 of the total 162 seats allotted to East Pakistan in the national assembly, and 288 of the 300 seats in the provincial legislature. Bhutto’s PPP won 81 national assembly seats out of the 138 seats allotted to the western wing in the national assembly, and 144 of the 300 in the provincial assemblies in the western provinces.

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Once the results of the elections were officially announced, President Yahya sent compliments to Mujib and Bhutto and invited them both to Islamabad. Mujib who had been approachable before the elections changed his demeanour and refused to discuss or negotiate the post-election scenario in the capital city in West Pakistan. This move was interpreted in some quarters as Mujib’s lack of interest in becoming the prime minister of a united Pakistan. His vehement pronouncements against West Pakistan and refusal to visit West Pakistan after the elections were sufficient to name him anti-West Pakistani and a separatist.

(To be continued.)