**The first time**

BY M A H I R A L I 2020-12-02

FOR the first 23 years of its existence, Pakistan was virgin territory as far as meaningful representative rule was concerned.

This depressing fact goes a long way towards explaining the popular enthusiasm in the run-up to the nation`s inaugural general elections 50 years ago this month.

The sheer novelty of universal adult franchise, and the multiplicity of expectations grounded in the very idea of democracy, underlay the palpable excitement that preceded the balloting on Dec 7 and 17 for the national and provincial assemblies. The banners and buntings and street-corner stalls are a cherished childhood memory, an early lesson in the power of possibilities and the necessity of hope.

Further lessons were to follow shortly thereafter, notably about the consequences of a dream not so much deferred as defenestrated. Butit was beyond the realm of contemplation as my parents and I, stretched out on mattresses, watched the results roll in, presumably like millions of others, on the first election night.

The results may not have been entirely unpredictable, but expectations were exceeded. The Awami League`s near clean sweep in East Pakistan surprised even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto found cause for rejoicing in the fact that his Pakistan Peoples Party not only emerged triumphant in Sindh but did even better in Punjab.

The provincial assembly elections 10 days later followed a similar pattern, with the National Awami Party thriving in NWFP (KP) and Balochistan.

But before any of the results could be translated into governance, the national representatives were expected to hammer out a new constitution in 120 days. The assembly never met. Mujib`s Six Points, a confederal platform for coexistence in a geographically unique nation, began to be viewed exclusively as a recipe for secession by the West Pakistan establishment, including those who had initially acknowledged some of its merits.

The 1970 elections, initially scheduled for October, had been postponed after widespread floods in East Pakistan. Another disaster soon followed: a cyclone and tidal wave categorised at the time as one of the most devastating natural catastrophes in history.

Stopping in Dhaka on his way back from Beijing as a personal emissary of the NixonKissinger clique, Pakistan`s military dictator Yahya Khan all but ignored the agony.

By the time he grasped the significance of at least pretending to empathise, his efforts were greeted with disdain. The idea of postponing the elections yet again was discussed, but the argument was trumped by fears of an uprising in the eastern wing. The resentmentof Pakistan`s Bengali citizens was not by any means a recent phenomenon. It had been building up for a couple of decades. It came to a head in March 1971.

Looking back, it`s not hard to argue that even if the level of autonomy demanded by the Awami League, with overwhelming backing from the Bengali masses, was ef fectively a pathway to secession or, perhaps more accurately, self-determination it ought to have been acceptable to all genuine democrats. Those who saw Mujib`s putative prime ministership, based on his party`s clear parliamentary majority, as a threat to Punjabi hegemony were hardly in any position to decry the League`s parochialism.

With a bit of compromise on both sides, at least the illusion of a united Pakistan could have persisted. If that was not to be, surely a separation could have been arranged peacefully. The real tragedy of 1971 was that the separation entailed a grotesque bloodbath.

Nearly half a century after the birth of Bangladesh, the bloodstains remain.

Yet, notwithstanding its awful conse-quences, it is still possible to gaze back upon the elections of 1970 and the sometimes exhilarating months that preceded them with a degree of nostalgia. I guess it has got something to do with lingeringnotions of what might have been. The idea that Pakistan could have turned into a viable, sustainable democracy still casts a certain spell.

But perhaps it`s no more than an illusion.

After all, look what`s become of the world`s largest democracy to Pakistan`s east, which once played a key role in the creation of Bangladesh. In recent years it has veered sharply towards a kind of fascism without much military assistance.

Pakistan`s first flawed experiment in representative rule, following the second partition, lasted little more than five years. An invaluable opportunity to recast what remained of the nation and set it on a progressive path was squandered and Bhutto`s dogged determination to use the military to his own advantage fatally backfired. The nation has never completely emerged from the malign shadow of what came next.

As for the nation`s first (and perhaps only free and fair) elections, all one can ultimately sayis that Pakistan was never the same again.

Yet the nation`s trajectory could have taken a very different turn. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com