**A watershed moment**

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Monday, Dec 20, 2021

December 16 – which has just passed – prompts reflection, introspection and resolution for political course correction to build a federal democratic Pakistan.

It was on this unfortunate and tragic day in 1971 when a majority of our own left Pakistan. Never have we seen in the modern history of the state that a majority in a nation-state parted its ways from a minority to make a new state. In 1971, 56 percent of the population declared independence from a minority, making this political tragedy a rather unique historical accident.

However, our textbooks, official historical accounts and mainstream media discussions reduce this historical tragedy to a conspiracy by traitors and puppets of foreign powers and so on and so forth. So what did force the Bengali people and the political leaders of former East Pakistan to part ways from (former) West Pakistan? Who was really responsible for this cessation?

These are some of the important questions that every young Pakistani must be asking and must have had some frustration for not having satisfactory answers to. Our officially closed corpus of political history does not address these genuine questions. In fact, instead of addressing these questions to the satisfaction of inquisitive young minds, it provides some fanciful and ahistorical answers by reducing the whole saga to an intrigue. But an officially closed corpus is an ideologically narrated historical account of the state written with a specific objective.

The seeds of disintegration were sown on August 15, 1947 when the speech of Mr Jinnah – of August 11, 1947 – was banned from being published in the newly born Pakistan. In his speech, Mr Jinnah clearly outlined the political future of Pakistan to be a modern inclusive democracy where every citizen would enjoy equal rights regardless of his/her religion, ethnicity and political identity.

The very democratic principles upon which Pakistan was to be built as a modern nation were trampled on in 1949 as the first attempt to transform Pakistan into a theocratic and over centralised state was made. Then, in 1953 the Urdu–Bangla controversy started to turn into a crisis of identity politics where a vast majority of Pakistanis felt they were being suppressed under the theocratic ideology of an over centralised state. This identity politics was an outcome of elite capture and the supremacist ideology of (former) West Pakistan that triggered the majority into rising for their rights.

In a politically inclusive federal democratic Pakistan, the question of ethnic identity politics could never turn into political dystopia. The elite of what was West Pakistan was afraid of democracy because it could allow the political leadership of the then East Pakistan to rule the country as the leaders of the majority.

Let us not forget that the Pakistan Movement was started from Bengal and the All India Muslim League was spearheaded by Bengali leaders. In fact, in what is today’s Pakistan – which was the north-west of India before the partition of 1947 – the Muslim League could never really enjoy large popular support. Even in Punjab, the Unionist Party was more popular than the All India Muslim League. Historically speaking, the credit of the creation of an independent Pakistan goes majorly to the Bengalis who defied the policies of centralisation of the Indian Congress which had increasingly become an inward-looking Hindu dominated political party.

Unlike the political objectives of the Indian Congress, the political leadership of the All India Muslim League, including Mr Jinnah, wanted to create a modern federation in India. Even the speeches of Mr Jinnah from April 1946 show that. It is important to mention that there was no doubt in the mind of Mr Jinnah and other leaders of the Muslim League about the significance of a federal democracy for an inclusive, pluralistic and stable modern state of multi ethic origins. It is however strange that with the creation of Pakistan the very democratic principles upon which this newly born country was to be governed were thrown away. That was the biggest political mistake of the formative phase of Pakistan which led to the cessation of (former) East Pakistan after 24 years of the creation of the new state.

Who is responsible for this debacle? Those who betrayed the very ideals of building a people-centric, inclusive and pluralistic Pakistan and who misused authority to perpetuate their myopic interests at the cost of our country and its generations.

On December 7, 1970 general elections were held in Pakistan for the first time after 23 years of non-democratic rule in the country. There was political excitement as the citizens of Pakistan were going to elect their political representatives for the first time. These elections are deemed as the most transparent elections in the history of Pakistan where two major political parties won popular support for their people-driven social democratic manifestoes.

These elections could be the watershed of our political history towards building a democratic Pakistan but that did not happen unfortunately. The East Pakistan based Awami League won 160 seats while the West Pakistan based Pakistan People’s Party won 81 seats for a National Assembly of 300 general seats. Thus, the Awami League emerged as the most popular political party with an absolute majority to form the political government. Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the leader of the Awami League, presented his six-point agenda for a federal and decentralised democratic Pakistan which was his party’s manifesto for the elections. He found strong resistance from Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

For Yahya Khan, the idea of political decentralisation and federal democracy was not acceptable. He pushed Mujibur Rehman to surrender his six-point agenda of a politically decentralized and federal system of democracy. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto saw it as a political opportunity to oppose Mujibur Rehman despite his social democratic political agenda. In this, no doubt Bhutto saw an opportunity to become the first elected prime minister of Pakistan as both he and Yahya Khan did not want a prime minister from (former) East Pakistan for different reasons.

The democratic principle of the rule of the majority was trampled in this way – due to specific interests and also political opportunism.

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