**[1971: hybrid failure](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726599/1971-hybrid-failure)**

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The writer, a former senator and federal minister, wrote and produced the 2021 documentary Separation of East Pakistan: The Untold Story.

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CONTRARY views [appeared recently](https://www.dawn.com/news/1722761) about which segment of the Pakistani state was responsible for the separation of East Pakistan — political or military? In this writer’s view, the 1971 tragedy was a political failure, both by the military and the political leadership.

The martial law government of president Gen Yahya Khan was a political government — of the military. The exercise of state power is inherently a political act, regardless of whether the wielder is civil and elected, or military and unelected.

In 22 months — April 1969-February 1971 — Gen Yahya took four progressive political decisions: 1) abolition of One Unit in West Pakistan and restoration of the four provinces; 2) adoption of the one-person-one-vote principle that automatically gave East Pakistanis the majority of votes by population and of National Assembly seats; 3) impartial conduct of credible elections in December 1970, whose results were accepted by all; 4) post-poll, his public reference to Awami League (AL) chief Shaikh Mujibur Rahman as the “future prime minister”.

Yahya encouraged the political leaders of both wings to hold talks to accommodate their sharp divergences — the majority party of East Pakistan did not win a single seat in West Pakistan’s four provinces, and no party of West Pakistan won a seat in East Pakistan.

The events of 1971 merit continuous research.

Inexplicably, from about mid-February 1971 onward, Yahya descended into a political abyss. Instead of addressing the nation in person to demonstrate sincerity of purpose in the face of extreme polarisation, he authorised the broadcast of a bland statement on March 1, 1971, postponing the first National Assembly session set for March 3 to an unspecified date.

Only after all hell broke loose in the eastern wing did he set a new date on March 6 to convene the first session on March 26. But it was too late. Trust was shattered. Formerly peaceful mass civil disobedience often turned violent. Pakistani flags were burnt, most state institutions attacked and some West Pakistanis even killed.

Yahya held a final (unsuccessful) round of talks with Mujib in Dacca, even as secret preparations began to launch the military operation of March 25-26, which led to the catastrophe of Dec 16.

In virtually all the 262 days in between, Yahya Khan’s decisions were abysmal failures of insight into both global geopolitical realities and internal political dynamics.

This included overestimates of US and Chinese support, underestimates of India’s inimical plans, non-filing of an emergency formal complaint to the UNSC on India’s invasion of East Pakistan on Nov 21, 1971, frequent non-responses to urgent messages from the civil and military authorities in Dacca, apathy to desperate requests for enhanced military support for the underequipped and vastly outnumbered combat troops (34,000 Pakistanis to 300,000-plus Indians and Mukti Bahinis).

The political leadership demonstrated rigidity and narrow self-interest. Instead of magnanimity in victory, Mujib declined two invitations to visit Rawalpindi and West Pakistan. While AL’s confederationist Six Points manifesto had been strongly endorsed by voters in East Pakistan, refusal to reach a publicly declared consensus prior to the Assembly’s first session conveyed a potentially dangerous inflexibility.

In January 1971, when two hijackers landed an Indian aircraft at Lahore airport, Z.A. Bhutto visited the plane to applaud the hijackers for an internationally criminal action. Soon after, India suspended Pakistan’s overflights across Indian territory, compounding tension and making the aerial connection between the two wings thrice as long and thrice as costly.

His insistence that the PPP alone represented West Pakistan’s viewpoint, despite being only marginally present in two out of four provinces (NWFP and Balochistan) displayed a disturbing hunger for power at any cost.

Through other generals, and in person, he influenced Yahya’s change of attitude towards Mujib. Soon after military action commenced, he declared “Pakistan is saved”. In October-November 1971, the PPP was even ready to contest farcical by-elections in East Pakistan. The West Pakistani leadership, political and military — there were no top Bengali generals in GHQ! — often collaborated directly.

Eight years before a new judicial-military nexus conducted his callous assassination, and just weeks before Dacca fell, Bhutto became Yahya’s deputy prime minister.

Mostly unreported massacres of non-Bengalis (March 1 to early May 1971) and atrocities over 262 days by some, and not the vast majority, of Pakistan Army troops who, as per the Indian supreme commander, fought “very gallantly”, were terrible and devastating, and require separate reflection.

Over the past 51 years, gross exaggerations have been so widely propagated as to become false ‘facts’. The hybrid failure of 1971 merits continuous research and deliberation.

*The writer, a former senator and federal minister, wrote and produced the 2021 documentary Separation of East Pakistan: The Untold Story.*
<https://www.1971untoldstory.com>

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