



Events Leading to the Liberation War of Bangladesh and Its Reflection in *The New York Times* (1-25 March 1971)

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Abstract: The implementation of provincial autonomy was the main area of disagreement between the Awami League, which won the 1970 election, and the Pakistan People's Party, which came in second. The Pakistan People's Party declined to contend for the opposition seat in the National Assembly and to wait another five years for a new election. Unfortunately, the West Pakistani authorities were reluctant to hand over power to the Bengalis. In that connection, Mujib and Yahya started their much-anticipated conversation on March 16, 1971. After granting the Pakistani army permission to slaughter and assault all Bengalis, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25, just when it appeared that the parties involved had reached a fundamental settlement. The purpose of the article is to assess the events leading up to the Liberation War in Bangladesh and how they were reflected in *The New York Times* from March 1–25, 1971.

Keywords: Elections, Provincial Autonomy, Martial Law, Declaration of Independence, The Talk, Constitution, National Integration.

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1. Introduction

'If you are united, there is no power on earth which can prevent you from getting Pakistan.' – said by Mohammad Ali Zinnah, in a Bengali crowd, before the birth of Pakistan in 1947 (Schanberg, 1971f). In 1947, Pakistan was created in a communal and fabricated manner. East Pakistan (known as East Bengal until 1955) and West Pakistan, the two wings of this new state of Pakistan, were separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. Despite Zinnah's promise of togetherness, there was nothing that the two wings of Pakistan had in common that would strengthen the integrity of the country. West Pakistan covered 3,10,000 square miles, while East Pakistan covered 55,000 square miles (International Commission of Jurists, 2017). In the absence of religion, these two wings lacked historical and economic ties and differed in language, race, temperament, culture, cuisine, climate, and geography. Even East Pakistani Muslims were more tolerant than their West Pakistani counterparts. Although East Pakistan accounted for the bulk of Pakistan's population, they had to struggle against the West Pakistani rulers' discriminatory tactics from the start.

The 1970 Pakistani general elections marked a watershed in the history of Bengali nationalism. In addition to implementing the Bengalis' demand for autonomy, the elections were crucial in

resolving the issue of inequality between Pakistan's two wings. As they sought a public mandate in favour of autonomy to eliminate the imbalance and terminate the internal colonial authority imposed on East Pakistan, the Awami League (henceforth AL) achieved a landslide victory in both East Pakistan Provincial Assembly and the National Assembly during those elections. Regretfully, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the head of the Pakistan People's Party (henceforth PPP), the second-largest party in the National Assembly, reacted negatively to the Bengalis' overwhelming victory. Bhutto stated in a statement on December 20, 1970, in Lahore, that his party could not wait another five years and was not ready to hold the opposition benches in the National Assembly. President Yahya Khan, who had imposed Martial Law, began postponing the handover of power to the elected officials in favour of Bhutto. It was an opportunity for Yahya to prepare for a military onslaught against the Bengali population of East Pakistan, even while the opposing parties were attempting to reach a political settlement. As the leaders of the AL awaited a final meeting to cement the political solution, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25, 1971, after allowing the Pakistani army complete control to eradicate all Bengalis. The Bengalis were forced to fight for their national liberation from all forms of discrimination and colonial tyranny in West Pakistan following the crackdown on March 25, 1971.



Not with standing Pakistan's strict censorship, *The New York Times* [henceforth *NYT*], one of the top American publications, frequently reported on developments in Bangladesh and released editorials, special stories, articles, and opinions. When the National Assembly proceedings were postponed in early March 1971, the Martial Law Administration placed stringent control on reporters in Dacca. Aside from the challenges already indicated, *NYT* provided the East Pakistani events in March 1971—which resulted in the Bangladesh Liberation War—the best attention possible.

2. Materials and Methods

Examining critically and in-depth how a major American Newspaper, like *NYT*, responded to the events building up to the Liberation War of Bangladesh between March 16 and 25, 1971, is the main objective of this study. Historical research is the fundamental methodology to be used. The goal of this is to examine the Liberation War of Bangladesh's events from March 1 to March 25, 1971, and how they were reflected in *NYT*. The events will be recounted and analysed using a historical timeline. All *NYT* issues released throughout the previously indicated time frame will be regarded as primary sources. An essential component of this procedure will be an examination of the numerous government publications that the relevant governments released in 1971. This article will also use these materials as primary sources. In addition, a variety of books, periodicals, and newspapers will be used as secondary sources.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 *The Conflict's Immediate Backdrop*

In order to select the lawmakers who would design the country's constitution and establish a domestic system, Pakistan held open elections from December 7, 1970, to January 17, 1971. The AL was given the authority to form the Provincial and Central Governments after winning 298 seats out of 310 in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly and 167 seats out of 169 (167 out of 313 total) in the National Assembly of Pakistan (Rahman, 2009a). The Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which leans left, was the second most prominent party in the National Assembly with 88 members. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the chairman of the PPP, had an unfavourable reaction to Bengalis' resounding win (Rahman, 2009a). The military elite expected the electorate to vote in a split manner. They believed that a new election would be necessary because a National Assembly that was so divided would find it nearly impossible to develop a constitution in the 120 days that were given. Since this process would recall a Martial Law administration officer, they thought that martial law would remain in place indefinitely. Or, compel the politicians to concur with the military regarding the type of the upcoming government (Raghavan, 2013). In this context on January 12, 1971, President Yahya and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had their first meeting. Yahya referred to Mujib as Pakistan's future prime minister when he left Dacca on January 14, 1971 (Choudhury, 2011, p. 151).

The primary cause of contention between the PPP and the AL was the Six-point¹

implementation. Based on the six points, the AL has already begun working on a draft constitution. During the second round of talks between the PPP and the AL, which took place from January 27 to

30, Bhutto mostly focused on addressing the Six-point insinuations and did not present any alternative or definite proposal regarding the nature of the forthcoming Constitution of Pakistan. The two parties continued to disagree as a consequence.

Three days after speaking with Yahya, Bhutto showed the characteristics of an unstable and greedy politician when he declared in Peshwar on February 15, 1971, that the PPP would not be attending the National Assembly session, which was scheduled to start in Dacca on March 3, 1971, because they could not travel there just to support the AL's proposed constitution. When Bhutto announced that she would boycott the National Assembly on February 28, 1971, Mujib responded by saying that he would be receptive to any helpful suggestions and that the Six-Point programme would not be imposed on anyone because it was meant for the people of Bangladesh as well as those of Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan, and the North West Frontier Province ('No Imposition,' 1971).

During the first week of February, Mujib had gotten in touch with the US consulate in Dacca to ask if the US could mediate if the AL declared its independence. The US Consul General in Dacca, Archer K. Blood, emphasised tactfully that the United States wanted Pakistan to stay a single country and was not interested in getting involved in its internal issues. Yahya started preparing the diplomatic groundwork for a possible invasion of East Pakistan at the same time. In a conversation with the US ambassador on February 25, he conveyed his deep displeasure with the current impasse. When Ambassador Farland appropriately reassured Yahya of Washington's commitment to Pakistan's integrity, he was naturally overjoyed (Raghavan, 2013).

3.2 *Role of the New York Times (March 1-25, 1971)*

The Yahya regime's reluctance to cede power to the majority party became evident by the beginning of March 1971. In violation of his promise, Yahya postponed the assembly without announcing a date for its next meeting on March 1, 1971. Yahya's indefinite postponement of the National Assembly's opening without a date for its reconvening on March 1, 1971, two days before it was scheduled to start draughting a constitution to restore civilian administration to Pakistan, sparked the crisis. In this regard, *NYT* ran an article on the first page on March 2, 1971. 'The Awami League wants the federal government to look after only the foreign affairs, defence, and some economic questions, with safeguards to prevent the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan,' the article stated, referring to the background of Pakistan's political turmoil. ('Pakistan Postpone Assembly,' 1971). By citing the AL as the majority party, it attacked Bhutto's role. It stated that although Mujib had been arguing since the December elections that the constitution should be based on the AL program because the Central Government and army were controlled by West Pakistanis, Bhutto had urged that the session be postponed. PPP did not approve of the provinces giving up authority like foreign aid, international trade, and foreign exchange. In addition to demanding time to reach a consensus with Mujib, Bhutto declared that his party would boycott the Assembly unless its viewpoint was given due respect and that he would declare a general strike in West Pakistan if the Assembly convened without PPP members. Yahya's biased approach was pointed up by *NYT*, which also stated that the President had promised to bring the Assembly into session

following a rational agreement among political leaders regarding the charter ("Pakistan Postpone Assembly," 1971).

A second item on a protest calling for East Pakistan's immediate independence after the National Assembly meeting was postponed was published by *NYT* on March 2, 1971. It wrote that Mujib said the minority had won out over the majority in response to the National Assembly's postponement. The paper further stated that frustrated, the public asked that a resolution be passed on March 1, 1971, calling for immediate independence ("East Pakistanis Demonstrate," 1971).

On March 2, the AL went on strike in Dacca in protest of the National Assembly's endless postponement. In an article about the strike's success published on March 3, 1971, *NYT* referred to Mujib as the 'national leader' of East Pakistan. The Yahya regime's implementation of Martial Law, which replaced civilian governance in Pakistan's five provinces and delayed the National Assembly session, was criticised in this article. The article also portrayed the Yahya regime's treatment of the press and media poorly, pointing out that curfews and press control were implemented in addition to the Martial Law features of its reign. *NYT* stated that the press was not allowed to publish anything that 'directly or indirectly goes against the integrity or sovereignty' of the country as a whole, citing the 1000-mile physical distance between Pakistan's two wings as one of the obstacles to the country's national integration. It was declared that the maximum punishment for violators would be ten years in prison ("Dacca Disorders Bring a Curfew," 1971). The *NYT* stated that despite having a small number of assembly seats, West Pakistanis had resisted East Pakistan's desire because they were concerned that regional autonomy would cause the nation to fragment. According to the article, the outcome of the December 1970 election to select a National Assembly to draft a constitution raised the prospect of an impending split between Pakistan's two wings, and Yahya's decision to postpone the Assembly caused the situation to reach a critical point ("Dacca Disorders Bring a Curfew," 1971). The US and other major powers shared this viewpoint. The National Security Council's Staff Security made it clear in a memo sent to the Deputy Secretary of Defence in Washington on March 3, 1971, that secession by the Bengalis or the division of Pakistan into its two wings by mutual consent had become a real possibility unless a compromise formula could be developed (Smith, 2018).

On the same day, *NYT* reported that on the first day of the countrywide strike, roving gangs of protesters were encircling the capital city. The publication referred to the demonstrators as 'nationalistic sources' and detailed how military helicopters hovered over Dacca, keeping an eye on the city, and rails and jeeps carrying troops passed through the city as a show of military might (Durdin, 1971a). An editorial published on March 3, 1971, showed *NYT*'s critical stance against the anarchic political scenario in East Pakistan brought on by the avaricious politicians' discriminatory tactics. By indicating Yahya's decision to postpone the session of National Assembly for an indefinite period of time as the reason behind the political crisis the paper wrote,

The miserable millions of Pakistanis, East and West, deserve better from political leaders who have put their own selfish power interests above the interests of the nation. Continuing intransigence on the part of the politicians can only lead to the total suppression once more of free politics in Pakistan and could precipitate

dissolution of the country ("... Riots in Pakistan," 1971).

At one point, the Yahya administration called a conference of Pakistan's top political leaders in an attempt to break the impasse. The AL responded by declining the invitation and calling for an early handover of power to the people's representatives. Similar to several earlier reporting, the *NYT* once more discussed the AL's call for regional autonomy on March 4, 1971, as a means of challenging the West Pakistani government's long-standing dominance. It chastised Bhutto's strategy and clarified that 'East Pakistan's insistence that foreign aid, foreign trade, and foreign exchange should be the prerogatives of the country's five provinces – East Pakistan and the four provinces of West Pakistan' is the main point of contention between Bhutto and Mujib ("Leader of Pakistan Calls Talk in Crisis," 1971). Earlier that same day, *NYT* published a story in which Mujib urged the Central Government of West Pakistan to stop its military rule in Bangladesh. In addition, the report noted that Mujib had not used the word 'East Pakistan,' instead referring to the territory by its traditional Bengali moniker, which translates to 'Bengali homeland' ("Strike is Extended," 1971).

In a piece published on March 5, 1971, *NYT* stated that military intervention in Pakistani politics was the root cause of all conflicts. In its description of the political climate in East Pakistan during the non-cooperation and non-violent movement, *NYT* stated that although the military forces maintained some order and enforced a curfew that lasted until dusk, Mujib and the AL had more power because the majority of the policing was carried out by party activists brandishing poles. On March 4, 1971, Mujib took over the East Pakistani radio station. In its piece from March 5, 1971, the paper cited Mujib's resolve to stick to the nationalist path and write a constitution for East Pakistan. Additionally, he was cited as saying on March 4 1971, 'We shall have our constitution and they in the West can have theirs. Then we can see how we can arrange to cooperate' (Durdin, 1971b).

Another item about the army's reinforcement and deaths during the general strike and the nonviolent, noncooperation campaign in East Pakistan was published by *NYT* on the same day. Despite Mujib's claim that 300 people had died during the general strike, *NYT* stated that 75 people had died in Chattogram overall, citing data from the Associated Press of Pakistan ("Army Reinforcements Arrive," 1971). On March 5, 1971, *NYT* published a second piece that included Mujib's solution to Pakistan's constitutional dilemma. The article claims that during an interview, Mujib said that he might accept a formula in which he would be the premier of East Pakistan and Bhutto, his competitor from West Pakistan, would be the premier of the West. 'It was the threat of Mr. Bhutto's leftist Pakistan People's Party to boycott the assembly that led to its postponement,' the paper said, criticising Bhutto's intentions and actions ("Two Premiers Proposed," 1971).

A letter from Pakistan's ambassador to the UN, Agha Shahi, was published by *NYT* on March 6, 1971. Agha sent the letter on February 26, 1971, informing the press that the United States committee for East Pakistan Relief had not discovered any evidence to back up the claims of inefficiency made by the Pakistani government. Additionally, he objected to the dispatches of Sydney H. Schanberg, the *NYT* correspondent, on December 30, 1970, and January 3, 1971, claiming that Sydney had disregarded Pakistan's own efforts before international aid delivery started in the East Pakistani areas devastated by the hurricane (Shahi, 1971).

Agha Shahi's primary goal in writing the letter was to repair the Yahya regime's damaged image in the eyes of the international community, which resulted from West Pakistan's discriminatory treatment of East Pakistan and military intervention in Pakistani politics.

The success of the nonviolent and noncooperation movement was discussed in another article published on March 6, 1971. It stated that the province was paralysed by a complete strike for the fourth day, and that Dacca's streets were largely tranquil with few army patrols. As martial law restrictions on press coverage grew more severe, it provided information about the food shortfall and once more denounced the Yahya government's strategy. Mujib was also the target of some unfair remarks in that report. 'Although only a local party leader, Sheikh Mujib ordered banks to open on a Moslem holiday to pay salaries to Government workers,' the publication stated, referring to him as a 'local party leader' ('Move For Calm in Dacca 1971). This phrase 'local party leader' was unfair because the AL became the majority party in the National Assembly and the Provincial Assembly following the 1970 election. Despite a few unfair statements, the study makes it abundantly evident that Mujib was leading a de facto government in Bangladesh.

There was a great deal of optimism for independence prior to March 7, 1971. Fearing secession, President Yahya announced in a nationwide broadcast on March 6, 1971, that the new National Assembly's postponed session would begin on March 25. In spite of the overwhelming public support for independence, Mujib stated in his speech on March 7, 1971, that he was hopeful about a political settlement. In his speech, Mujib made four demands, asking Yahya to consider them before addressing the National Assembly. These included: a. the immediate lifting of martial law; b. the military's quick departure to their barracks; c. a judicial investigation into army killings in East Pakistan; and d. the prompt handover of power to the delegates chosen by the people. Eventually, a fifth question was added to these: the army's reinforcements from West Pakistan must cease (Salik, 1997). Although Bhutto and his avaricious generals were unwilling to concede defeat, Yahya recognised the first, fourth, and fifth requests as indicating defeat against Mujib and the will of the People.

On March 7, 1971, *NYT* ran a story discussing Mujib's potential declaration of independence. It stated that despite Yahya's attempts to stop secession, Mujib's supporters still anticipated him to announce East Pakistan's independence ("East Pakistani May Declare Secession," 1971). The paper in this article, like some others, explained the historical context of the clashes between Pakistan's two wings. 'West Pakistan is economically prosperous than the eastern wing, but the latter has 56 percent of the total population and produces most of the country's jute – a major foreign currency earner,' it stated, referring to the communal birth of Pakistan in 1947 ("East Pakistani May Declare Secession," 1971). Yahya's view that the provinces should not be strengthened was also emphasised in the same article, as he declared that he would not back any constitution that would weaken the bond between the two regions of Pakistan. On the same day, the tabloid reported in another piece that a conflict between protesters and security forces in the Tongi industrial region on March 5 had resulted in the deaths of 20 people. It referred to March 5, 1971, as

the fifth and bloodiest day of violence and stated that the military had declared it was pulling out of the city ("20 Reported Killed," 1971).

On March 7, 1971, *NYT* published another analysis in its weekly special feature titled 'The World.' The background of the struggle between Pakistan's two wings was significantly discussed in that article. It reaffirmed that one of the causes of the conflict was the army's political participation in Pakistan. It noted that the Bengalis had long considered the Punjabis to be foreign occupiers, and they had always controlled the Pakistani army ("East and West," 1971).

On March 8, 1971, *NYT* ran a piece that discussed Mujib's speech from March 7. It is evident from the article's headline that the world community was confident in the proclamation of independence on March 7. This article gave Mujib a lot of credit since he refrained from declaring Bangladesh's independence. According to the publication, there had been concerns that Mujib might declare East Pakistan's independence and start a civil war, but by making fresh demands instead of breaking with the western side, he provided some breathing room in the Pakistani dilemma. 'East Pakistan's poor Bengali masses were championed by Sheikh Mujib, who has been celebrated by his supporters as the founder of Bangladesh or Bengal Nation' the article stated ("New Demands Set by East Pakistani," 1971). In fact, Mujib's speech on March 7 was a response to Yahya's declaration on March 6 regarding the new date for the Assembly's convening.

The newspaper ran another story about the general strike, demonstrations against Martial Law, and calls for Dacca's full independence on the same day. As Yahya demonstrated his will to maintain Martial Law until the Assembly draughted a constitution that he approved of, which encouraged foreign residents to flee Dacca, the daily underlined its uncertainty about a peaceful resolution to the Pakistani situation. Through indirect means, *NYT* demonstrated that East Pakistanis from all walks of life were calling for complete independence. Inmates who forced their way out of a jail (seven of them were slain by police firing) demonstrated their allegiance to Mujib by yelling independence slogans at one of the AL's headquarters. In this sense, *NYT*, a well-known international newspaper, was instrumental in influencing local and global public opinion in favour of Bangladesh. 'If sheikh Mujib seems to yield at all to the leaders in the West, the nationalist movement here may be taken over by more radical elements that want to proclaim full independence,' the publication said in reference to the proclamation of independence and Mujib's impact on the general populace of Bangladesh (Durdin, 1971c).

The whole civilian administration, including judges, police, and civil servants of the defence system, were heeding Mujib's call by refusing to join the office during the non-cooperation movement against Pakistan's military government. On March 9, 1971, *NYT* published a front-page article about the political situation in East Pakistan. Topics covered included the activities of student leaders, the departure of foreign nationals to their home countries, and Chief Justice B. A. Siddique's refusal to swear in Gen. Tikka Khan, the new Military Governor for East Pakistan. The study claims that student leaders played a significant role in Mujib's AL. They led the nationalist campaign for an independent East Pakistan and were more extreme than the party's officials. The same report also said that the AL members were determined to govern the de

facto government under Mujib. Members of the party were ready to fight against any attempt by the military government to have government employees report for duty. Within this context, the *NYT* reported that 'the Awami League is increasingly becoming an alternative authority to the representatives here of the central Government in West Pakistan' (Durdin, 1971d).

Similar to some back issues, *NYT* on March 10, 1971, featured a front-page article about the political situation in East Pakistan. The article covered the following topics: protests, the de facto government under Mujib, the situation of foreign residents in East Pakistan, the support of other political parties for Mujib, the history of the conflict, and the boycott of government officials against martial law authorities. Everything in East Pakistan was proceeding under Mujib's active supervision following the postponing of the National Assembly proceedings. Mujib issued several directives during that period to regulate a variety of activities, such as public service, banking, and public order. Since martial law was imposed in March 1969, the East Pakistanis 'were in effect governing themselves for the first time,' according to the *NYT* (Durdin, 1971e). On March 9, 1971, *NYT*'s Dacca correspondent Tillman Durdin observed, 'Dacca today was a city of black flags in accordance with an Awami League directive ... they were flown even from bicycles.' This was startling because, in accordance with Mujib's orders, every Bengali was flying the black flag (Durdin, 1971e). Naturally, the news inspired support for Bangladesh among the population both domestically and internationally. East Pakistan's highly educated middle class disseminated knowledge and awareness across the country. In its article about Bhutto and Yahya, *NYT* referred to the PPP as a 'defender of federal government.' Following his speech on March 7, Mujib gained the backing of other political groups, which led to a strong sense of solidarity against the military government in East Pakistan. Among them was the National Awami Party, led by Mawlana Bhasani. In a speech on March 9, 1971, Bhasani threatened to start a campaign for complete independence if Yahya did not accede to Mujib's demand by March 25. *NYT* said that by identifying Bhasani as Mujib's longstanding political rival, it would boost 'the Sheikh's' position and win over the far-left National Awami Party (Durdin, 1971e).

A free Bangladesh campaign was organised in North America at the same time that a nonviolent, noncooperation movement was taking place in East Pakistan. An article based on the East Pakistan League of America's demonstration for an independent East Pakistan was published by *NYT* on March 10, 1971. The protesters occupied a meeting room at the Pakistan Mission and marched outside the UN holding placards. They pledged to acknowledge Mujib's authority alone. In order to rally support for the right of 75 million Bengalis in East Pakistan to make their own decisions about their future, League President K. S. Ahmed wrote letters to every UN representative ("A Free East Pakistan Demanded at Rally Here," 1971).

Two separate pieces about the deadlock scenario caused by Yahya Khan's postponement of the National Assembly session were published by *NYT* on March 11, 1971. The paper's proactive and supportive editorial stance towards the Pakistan issue is reflected in these pieces. One of those articles used certain statistics to show the political, cultural, and economic prejudice that exists between Pakistan's two wings. East Pakistan consistently received less from international aid, state spending, and nearly every other source after Pakistan was established. For many years, East Pakistan's

exports of jute, tobacco, pepper, and other basic goods provided 80–90% of the nation's foreign exchange revenues, according to *NYT*. However, the majority of these profits were used to establish a sizable military force, as well as Western companies and public works projects. It stated that projects and relief in the West had consistently gotten more than those in the East, and that foreign funding was distributed through the Islamabad national government, which was dominated by Westerners. Only 10% of the armed forces were Bengalis, and the majority of the defence budget—which remained at 65% of yearly expenditures—went to Westerners, according to the article detailing the military dominance of West Pakistan. Mujib correctly noted that "the East's being used as a colony and a market" because Western manufacturers were able to monopolise the supply of consumer goods to the East due to the growth of industries in the West without corresponding development in the East (Durdin, 1971f). The article also talked on the ethnic and cultural distinctions between Pakistan's two regions, noting that 'West Pakistanis have a Middle Eastern perspective, while Bengalis have a South East Asian one.' The 50 million primarily Hindu Bengalis in India share a cultural and ethnic tie with the less pious Easterners ((Durdin, 1971f). In this sense, *NYT*'s report from March 11th effectively illustrated West Pakistan's economic, cultural, and political dominance. It correctly noted that the dominance of the Indian subcontinent by British colonial rule was nearly identical to the dominance of the eastern part of Pakistan by the Western one. The Bengalis were particularly active in advocating for the return of democratic governance since they saw the Pakistani military administration as little more than a colonial master. Another report on Bhutto's desire to meet with Mujib in order to come to an accord was published by the *NYT* the same day ("West Pakistani Offers to Meet Eastern Rival," 1971).

NYT also concentrated on the impact of the impasse that resulted from the National Assembly's session being postponed. On March 12, 1971, a detailed piece regarding the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts for the two million people impacted by the November 1970 cyclone—which were put on hold due to the tensions between East and West Pakistan—was published on the second page. According to *NYT* on the same day, the directors and employees of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, the Reconstruction Board, and the chief agencies involved with disaster areas were at home in Dacca and unable to handle the recovery program work on housing, embankments against sea waters, and other rebuilding projects, even though the AL allowed the relief work to continue during the general strike and ban. The report also criticised the government's tardiness in making decisions and charged that the Pakistani government had not chosen to use the 7.5 million US dollars that the US Congress had authorised for disaster assistance. It stated that Chinese relief money sent to the Pakistani government for the Pakistan Red Cross was never given to the organization (Durdin, 1971g). It is clear from all of the paper's information that the Pakistani government purposefully neglected relief and reconstruction efforts in cyclone-affected areas, which fuelled resentment in East Pakistan and led Bengalis to accuse West Pakistan of colonial-style exploitation and dominance.

An article regarding East Pakistan's self-rule, the state of bank money, and the AL's directives to banks and other crucial financial institutions for the economy was published by *NYT* in the second week of March 1971. The majority of East Pakistan's private banks were Western bank branches. If they didn't have permission from

the home office in West Pakistan, they simply had restricted drawing privileges. Checks on other banks were not being cleared by banks. According to the article, customers were in a panic and were taking money out of their accounts and not making any new deposits as a result of the rumours that three of the biggest private banks would close. The same article said that East Pakistan's issues resulting from its attempts at self-rule were making West Pakistan's economic dominance, against which East Pakistan had long fought, glaringly obvious. The report also revealed that bank officials were hesitant to deviate from standard protocols and rules in order to alleviate the financial situation by functioning as a mostly autonomous state organization (Durdin, 1971h).

Because every civil employee in government offices joined the boycott and skipped work, the military authorities were unable to maintain any authority outside of the airfield and military institutions during the non-cooperation movement. On March 13, the authorities imposed Martial Law and threatened to imprison civilian workers at defence installations who failed to show up for work. On March 14, 1971, *NYT* published an article about the military order and Mujib's response to it. The order was characterised as the military's first 'get tough' pronouncement, and there were concerns that it would portend a more aggressive military stance in general. In reaction to the military decree Mujib said:

Since we have already voiced the demand of the entire people that martial law itself should be lifted, the promulgation of such orders can only serve as provocations to the people ... the people will continue with their struggle despite such attempts at intimidation, for they know that no force can with stand the strength of the United people (Durdin, 1971i).

Mujib said on March 14, 1971, that he was taking over East Pakistan's affairs with the goal of emancipating the people of Bangladesh, prior to Yahya's arrival in Dacca to debate AL's demands for autonomy. Additionally, he issued 35 instructions in all (Rahman, 2009a). The term 'Bengal Homeland,' which is the English equivalent of 'Bangla Desh,' was used on the main page of *NYT* article on March 15th that discussed Mujib's orders to the country and his requests to Yahya. In that story, the paper also cited Mujib's demand. On March 14, Mujib told reporters, 'I still want to meet President Yahya.' I want the rights of my people to be upheld ("Leader in Dacca Acts to Takeover," 1971).

NYT published a bibliography of Mujib in its special section titled 'Man in the News' on March 15, 1971, just one day prior to the negotiations between Mujib and Yahya. "Riding wave of popularity amounting to mass worship (Sheikh Mujib talking with followers in Dacca on Friday)" was the caption for a picture of Mujib. With reference to Mujib's physical attributes, the paper described the various stages of his career, including his work as a student activist, his development as a young political figure in the 1950s and early 1960s, and his support of the Bengali nationalistic movement based on the Six Points to free the people of Bangladesh from West-Pakistani semi-colonial exploitation. According to the article, he delivered denunciations with a sparkle in his eyes and was referred to as 'the undisputed leader' of the people. It described Mujib's rise to prominence at the age of fifty as the result of nearly a lifetime of political activism against the interests

of the powerful. *NYT* claims that Mujib's political philosophy was democratic socialism and that his policies, such as nationalising banks, insurance firms, and large enterprises, were comparable to those of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India. It stated, 'Today Sheikh Mujib is riding on a wave of popularity that amounts to mass worship,' alluding to the overwhelming victory in the 1970 elections. His words are become actual laws (Durdin, 1971j). According to *NYT*, 'Friends do not rate him as an intellectual.' Mujib was extremely modest and meek despite his fame and influence. He openly acknowledges that he requires professional guidance in a variety of areas (Durdin, 1971j). An story about Mujib that gave him a lot of acclaim is undoubtedly evidence of *NYT*'s editorial stance in favour of the autonomy struggle led by Mujib against West Pakistani dominance.

On March 16, 1971, Mujib and Yahya began their eagerly anticipated negotiations (Rahman, 2009a). From March 16 onwards, *NYT* began publishing news on the progress of the negotiations, including analyses on later issues pertaining to the Pakistan crisis. The future of Pakistan as a unified nation was the subject of several of the articles. For example, on March 16, 1971, the daily published an article on the negotiations. This article clarified that the AL had been looking for a plan that would keep a central government but grant it limited authority over the highly autonomous eastern and western provinces. *NYT* also examined East Pakistan's public sentiment and observed that it had transcended sentiments from only a few weeks prior, with a growing call for independence (Durdin, 1971k). The article claimed that a loose confederation between the East and the West might be the only way forward, citing a high AL source. This *NYT* information is comparable to that found in the *Pakistan White Paper*. In a draft proclamation filed on March 23, 1971, the AL went beyond the Six-point and demanded the establishment of a "confederation" rather than a "federation," according to the *Pakistan White Paper* (The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, 2017). It is clear from the facts above that the AL and Mujib had a confederation plan from the moment they began talking with Yahya on March 16. Perhaps Mujib believed that a loose confederation would be more effective in the long run for gaining independence.

India forbade the flight of any country's military aircraft over Indian Territory to East Pakistan on March 15, 1971, notwithstanding the growing support for independence in East Pakistan. On March 16, 1971, *NYT* published an item about India's decision to outlaw flights. It stated that pilots of foreign civilian aircraft travelling from West Pakistan to East Pakistan had been instructed to make a 'technical stop' in India, ostensibly to prevent the movement of military personnel and weapons ("India bans Flights," 1971). Stories about Yahya's unpopularity and Mujib's popularity and political career were also included in the newspaper. On March 16, 1971, *NYT* reported that the Muslim leader of East Pakistan, Mujib, had become a folk hero among the West Bengali Hindus. According to the publication, Mujib's concern for his oppressed people and his independent attitude were what made the people of West Bengal so admiring of him. (Schanberg, 1971a). In a story about the evolution of first-day talk published by *NYT* on March 17, 1971, Mujib was referred to as 'the political leader of rebellious East Pakistan.' *NYT* blamed Yahya for the situation and said Mujib's AL had essentially taken over the East and was

leading a boycott of the Yahya military government's power (Durdin, 1971).

In the second week of March 1971, foreigners started to leave Dacca because of the political unrest and the threat of unbridled violence between Pakistan's two wings. As anxious Bengalis fled West Pakistan, similarly anxious West Pakistanis fled East Pakistan in reverse, with their children clasped in their arms, balancing on their hips, and carrying all of their valuable possessions (Osmany, 2014). On March 18, 1971, *NYT* carried a special report about the departure of West Pakistanis and Bengalis. The article made an effort to identify the reasons behind the evacuation and the general evacuation situation in that piece. The National Assembly, which had a majority from East Pakistan, was postponed by the central government, which led to unrest that killed some West Pakistanis, according to *NYT*. It added that, on the other hand, some of the thousands of Bengalis living in West Pakistan had been attacked (Schanberg, 1971b). *NYT* released a piece on the progress of Mujib and Yahya's negotiations that same day. According to *NYT*, neither Mujib nor Yahya reported any progress in resolving or even reducing the problem that threatens to separate the Muslim nation. In this regard, it noted that all government and corporate operations were carried out in compliance with Mujib's orders. Taxes were being paid to the Government of Bangladesh rather than the Central Government, and central government institutions were being boycotted (Pakistan Talks Continue in Dacca," 1971).

Positive signs of a political settlement had been present on the evening of March 18, 1971 (Choudhury, 2011). The basic points of agreement were:

- a. Lifting of martial law and transfer of power to a civilian government by a Presidential Proclamation.
- b. Transfer of power in the provinces of the majority parties.
- c. Yahya to remain as President and in control of the Central Government.
- d. Separate sittings of the National Assembly members from East and West Pakistan preparatory to a joint session of the House to finalize the Constitution (Rahman, 2009b).

It should be mentioned that Yahya's actions were still somewhat unclear and that it was clear he was just waiting rather than making an effort to engage in dialogue with the AL. The army started getting ready for the military option around February 20th. As early as December 11, 1970, contingency plans were in place. On February 27, the first military reinforcements started to reach Dacca. Major Generals Khadim Raja and Rao Forman Ali convened in the GOC's office early on March 18, 1971, to develop the fundamental operational plan that would later be known as 'Operation Searchlight.' It was witnessed by Siddiq Salik, the Public Relations Officer for the East Pakistani Martial Law Administration. He described,

General Forman wrote down the new plan on a light blue office pad, using an ordinary school pencil. I saw the original plan in General Forman's immaculate hand. General Khadim wrote its second part, which dealt with distribution of resources and the allocation of tasks to brigades and units. The plan christened 'Operation SEARCHLIGHT' consisted of sixteen paragraphs spread over five pages (Salik, 1997).

In light of the evolving circumstances, *NYT* ran pieces throughout the course of the following several days about the expansion of the Pakistani army in East Pakistan, the nature of the upcoming constitution, the rationale for the Bengali people's demand for autonomy, and the fallout from the failure of the dialogue. One of *NYT*'s editorials from March 19, 1971, provides a clear explanation of the newspaper's perspective on the Pakistan crisis. While the newspaper suggested that Bhutto embrace Mujib's long-standing desire for broad regional autonomy, it also suggested that Mujib temper his adamant calls for local control over important central government operations like commerce and foreign aid ("Fateful Talks in Dacca," 1971).

On the same day, the newspaper reported that there were more West Pakistani troops in East Pakistan and that they were travelling from Karachi to Dacca in civilian clothes on Pakistan International Airways' commercial flights, where the military had taken up 100 of the 160 seats (Schanberg, 1971c). This excerpt from the March 19, 1971, article shows that the slaughter on March 25 and later was well planned and premeditated, and that Yahya was only gaining time to begin a crackdown. *NYT* also revealed some ongoing rumours about Dacca in the same story. The army's intention to bomb the city was one of them. People were in a frenzy as a result, and families were fleeing Dacca for their villages out of dread (Schanberg, 1971c).

When the personnel from both sides was formally summoned together for a working level meeting on March 19, 1971, following one of the sessions with Yahya, Mujib seemed happy for the first time. On March 20, 1971, *NYT* examined this development and stated that there was a definite hint of movement in the negotiations over East Pakistan's demand for self-rule. It also revealed the strong public support for independence and included some well-known catchphrases, like 'Shadhin Bangla Desh!' [Bangladesh independence], 'Joi Bangla!' [Bengali victory] (Schanberg, 1971d).

NYT kept up its coverage of the Pakistani situation, paying particular attention to the progress of the negotiations. According to sources close to the negotiations, *NYT* conjectured in a news item on March 21, 1971, that a temporary solution for the transition from military to civilian control was being discussed by both parties. Additionally, the publication claimed that the military junta in West Pakistan had already lost control of East Pakistan (Schanberg, 1971e). Another story about Bhutto's announcement to visit Dacca and the nature of the next Assembly and constitution was published by the newspaper on the same day. It proposed that while the National Assembly convened and enacted a new constitution, the interim government would ostensibly have authority ("More Hope Seen in Karachi," 1971). The AL's student and worker supporters had been demanding complete independence, according to another report published that same day by *NYT*. The report also predicted that Mujib would accept something close to independence, possibly two largely autonomous regions and a central government with limited authority over defence and certain foreign policy issues (Schanberg, 1971f).

Following their meeting with Yahya on March 21, 1971, Bhutto and his advisers declared that everything would be alright when they arrived in Dacca on March 20, 1971. Prior to then, Bhutto met Yahya in Karachi on March 14. In his own account, Bhutto told Yahya that although his party agreed with Mujib's calls for a transfer of power and the lifting of martial law, the details of these requests needed to be negotiated based on a mutual agreement

(Raghavan, 2013). In an article published on March 22, 1971, *NYT* criticised Bhutto's strategy, which seemed to use 'delaying tactics,' in which all of the important West Pakistani political figures flew to the East on March 16, 1971, to hold negotiations, particularly with Mujib and Yahya (Schanberg, 1971g). Being a well-known American daily newspaper, *NYT* was crucial in this article since it exposed the Yahya regime's dictatorial and autocratic nature to the international community.

On March 23, 1971, *NYT* ran two separate pieces about the ongoing debate and the Pakistan issue. Following a meeting with Bhutto and Mujib, Yahya Khan postponed the National Assembly session for the second time on March 22. In this regard, *NYT*, quoting Yahya, stated in a piece published on March 23, 1971, that further time was required to settle the dispute over East Pakistan's desire for autonomy. Bhutto was also chastised by *NYT*, which said that he had travelled to Dacca after a number of days of inexplicable reluctance and was met with hostile Bengali crowds since many Bengalis in East Pakistan held Bhutto responsible for the current crisis (Schanberg, 1971h). The National Assembly's March 1 delay resulted in a deadlock that put Pakistan's economy under extreme strain. The newspaper illustrated in another piece published on March 23, 1971, how the suspension of trade between the East and West during the non-cooperation movement severely impacted Western manufacturers and businessmen. Using a variety of statistical data, *NYT* demonstrated in this piece that East Pakistan has been utilised as a colony and a market for West Pakistan from the inception of Pakistan (Durdin, 1971m). The AL-led Bengalis' quest for provincial autonomy was supported by this article.

On March 24, 1971, *NYT* ran an item about the celebration of 'resistance day' and the unveiling of the new 'Bangla Desh' flag, in addition to their usual updates on the Pakistan problem. Although all sides repeatedly stated that some progress had been achieved, *NYT* declared in that piece from April 24 that there were no indications of actual development. It claimed that although the three parties were negotiating how to keep the two wings united by any means necessary, the atmosphere, catchphrases, and street discourse all favoured independence, demonstrating that the desire for it outweighed any short-term agreement (Schanberg, 1971i).

It's also clear that Bhutto and Mujib shared a little common ground. Bhutto stated on March 24, 1971, that the negotiations were proceeding well and that he would stay in Dacca for until long was required (Rahman, 2009a). Unfortunately, however, Bhutto and his party's leaders decided that military action was necessary, and on the morning of March 24, 1971, Bhutto informed Yahya of this (Raghavan, 2013). When the ALs met with Yahya's team on March 23, they presented the proposed declaration. Despite being sincere, both parties' experts came to the conclusion that their disagreements could be settled. Regardless, when the presidential team denied the differences as substantial changes, the AL team said that Mujib and Yahya might still reach an agreement (Raghavan, 2013). By this time, preparations for a military intervention were well underway. Following the discussion with the AL on March 23, Yahya decided to put the proposal into action.

Citing the leaders of five minor factions in Pakistan's National Assembly, *NYT* stated on March 25, 1971, that Mujib and Yahya

had completely agreed on constitutional issues that threatened to cause a political rift between East and West Pakistan ("Pakistan's Leaders Reported in Accord," 1971). According to this account, by March 24, the opposing parties—Mujib Yahya, Bhutto, and smaller factions in Pakistan's National Assembly—had come to an understanding. On March 24, Bhutto further demonstrated her deceit by confirming that the agreement would have been expected at a joint session of the President's advisers, the AL, and the PPP ("we Are Making Some Progress," 1971). Tajuddin Ahmed added in his statement on April 17 that following the final meeting between Yahya and the AL advisers on March 24, 1971, a call for a final session to finish the document was expected (Rahman, 2009b). The same was also affirmed by Mujib's economic advisor, Rehman Sobhan (Rahman, 2009b). Blood's main contact with the AL leadership was Alamgir Rahman, the general manager of ESSO in East Pakistan, who was close to Mujib. Alamgir told Blood on March 24 that Mujib had been certain as of the evening of March 23 that he had made a deal with Yahya. Alamgir stated that Yahya might hold the final meeting of principles after the advisers had finished draughting the agreement's final three or four clauses (Blood, 2002). Richard Helms of CIA also reported at a Washington Special Action Group meeting on March 26, 1971, that an agreement was imminent on March 24 and that the breakdown may have resulted from Mujib's demand that Martial Law be lifted immediately (Smith, 2018).

After reaching a complete consensus, it is possible to draw the conclusion that Yahya betrayed. While the AL leaders were waiting for a final conference to finalise the draft proclamation, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25th, giving the Pakistani army complete authority to slaughter every Bengali (Rahman, 2009a). The defenceless Bengalis were being wiped out just before midnight. The military struggle for Bangladesh's cause and independence therefore began against the Pakistani state, which was fighting a war against humanity in the name of preserving the unity of an Islamic Pakistan.

4. Conclusion

After Pakistan's 1970 election, the implementation of province autonomy was the main area of disagreement between the AL and the PPP. The PPP declined to remain in the opposition seat of the National Assembly for an additional five years. However, the West Pakistani rulers were unfortunately reluctant to hand over power to the Bengalis. Accordingly, Mujib and Yahya started their much-awaited discussion on March 16, 1971. After giving the Pakistani army the go-ahead to slaughter and injure all Bengalis, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25, just when it appeared that the parties involved had reached a fundamental settlement. Despite Pakistan's strict censorship, *NYT*, one of the top American newspapers, published regular articles, editorials, special reports, and opinions about the events in Bangladesh in March 1971. It produced fifty-eight news stories about the crisis in Pakistan between March 1 and 25, 1971.

NYT covered the history of Pakistan's political crises in a few of its reports. It discussed the 1000-mile physical separation between Pakistan's two wings and the centrality of the crisis—West Pakistan's military and federal government dominance. The article revealed that in the month of March 1971 there were more West

Pakistani soldiers in East Pakistan and that they were travelling from Karachi to Dacca in civilian clothes.

By citing the AL as the majority party, it attacked Bhutto's role. It stated that although Mujib had been arguing since the December elections that the constitution should be based on the AL program because the Central Government and army were controlled by West Pakistanis, Bhutto had urged that the session be postponed. *NYT* identified the political crisis' focal point as Yahya's decision to adjourn the National Assembly session indefinitely.

NYT reported on the success of the non-cooperation movement while it was in progress. It praised Mujib's leadership abilities in a number of its publications. The paper pointed out that Mujib had been acclaimed by his supporters as the founder of Bangladesh and referred to him as the champion of the poor Bengali masses of East Pakistan. According to *NYT*, Mujib's popularity stemmed from his lack of communal bias. *NYT* had no doubts regarding Pakistan's secession. It demonstrated that there was a chance that the two wings of Pakistan would soon split apart based on the results of the December 1970 election to select a National Assembly to draft a constitution. Yahya's decision to postpone the Assembly caused the issue to reach a critical point.

East Pakistan's political situation and public sentiment were also depicted in the publication, which subtly demonstrated that the demand for complete independence was shared by East Pakistanis from all walks of life. It covered the North American-organized free Bangladesh movement in this perspective. *NYT* expressed optimism on Bangladesh's declaration of independence, stating in mid-March 1971 that recent developments had increased the likelihood of a declaration of independence or something similar. In addition, *NYT* defended the call for independence and claimed that East Pakistanis are threatening to secede due to what they see as years of Western-sponsored exploitation.

Foreigners began fleeing Dacca in the second week of March 1971 due to the political conflict and fear of unchecked bloodshed between Pakistan's two wings. Nervous Bengalis were escaping West Pakistan because of fear of violence, while Punjabis and other West Pakistanis were escaping Bangladesh in the opposite direction. Pakistani aircraft were not allowed to fly across Indian territory at the time.

As the much awaited meeting between Mujib, Yahya, and Bhutto began, some reports cautioned that if a patchwork agreement was made, it would likely fail quickly. Since Bhutto and Mujib shared some common ground, the *NYT* condemned the negotiation process as a whole and said that secession was likely. Since the mood, slogans, and street conversation were all in favour of independence, it was claimed that the demand for independence was greater than any interim compromise. Meanwhile, the three participants at the bargaining table discussed how to keep the two wings together, no matter how shaky the connection. While the AL leaders were waiting for a final conference to finalise the draft proclamation, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25, giving the Pakistani army the authority to slaughter every Bengali. *NYT's* warning that any arrangement that was less than autonomy would result in secession was confirmed by this incident.

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Endote

¹ A booklet titled 'Our demands for existence: 6-point program' was published in the name of Sheikh Mijibur Rahman and was distributed in the council meeting of the Awami League held on 18 March 1966. These Six points were:

- a) The constitution should provide for a federation of Pakistan in the true sense on the basis of the Lahore Resolution and for a Parliamentary form of Government based on the supremacy of duly elected legislature on the basis of universal adult franchise.
- b) The Federal Government shall deal with only two subjects – defence and foreign affairs – with all residuary subjects vested in the federating states.
- c) There should be either two separate freely convertible currencies for the two wings or one currency with two separate Reserve Banks to prevent inter-wing flight of capital.
- d) The power of taxation and revenue collection shall be vested in the federating units. The Federal Government will receive a share to meet its financial obligations.
- e) Economic disparities between the two wings shall disappear through a series of economic, fiscal and legal reforms.
- f) A militia or para-military force must be created in East Pakistan, which at present has no defence of its own (Arefin, 2015).

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