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**Fifty years on**

It has been exactly 50 years since independence was declared by the Awami League leadership for the people of former East Pakistan. It took another nine months of bitter hostility involving civil war in former East Pakistan and a full-fledged war between Pakistan and India for Bangladesh to become a free and independent country.

The period saw a lot of violence, after which there was a surrender in December 1971. However, despite the surrender, let us not forget that Pakistani jawans and officers fought pitched battles in the most difficult of circumstances, with thousands sacrificing their lives. Their gallantry is part of our proud history and must remain so. The surrender was more a result of political blunders since the birth of Pakistan, especially our refusal to accept the rights of the Bengalis as equal citizens.

As Bangladesh celebrates its 50th year of independence today on March 26, it is worth remembering the events that led to the dismemberment of our country. This event is part of our bitter history and must be recollected without prejudice and political point-scoring.

What went wrong in March 1971 was a consequence of events that spanned nearly two decades. Our inability to prepare and agree on the constitution for nine long years after Partition was the first blow to the aspirations of our Bengali brethren. But within two years of the first constitution, Pakistan witnessed the first of its four military interventions, the one that caused irreparable damage to the integrity and solidarity of our country.

The 1956 constitution was abrogated and thrown in the ‘dustbin’ – a term that was used several times later in our history. With the imposition of martial law and no elections in sight, the people of (the then) East Pakistan started to feel like second-grade citizens. This was bound to happen since the entire decision-making lay with the military regime of the time and to a lesser extent the bureaucracy, and Bengalis were almost non-existent in both these services.

The first military rule lasted 10 years with almost no political activity allowed in the entire country. The media and the political opposition were muzzled and those who opposed Ayub Khan’s regime were not only arrested but also given exemplary punishments.

Unfortunately, the military intervention was justified by the then Supreme Court – a trend that was to be seen over and over again in the coming decades. The justice system never really recovered from that poor judgment. Every military intervention has been upheld since then; and cases such as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s hanging are a blot on the face of our judicial history.

Despite the phenomenal economic development during the 10 years of Ayub Khan’s rule, the people in former East Pakistan remained disillusioned – clearly reflecting the fact that without political participation and fundamental rights, economic progress means nothing. The former West Pakistan remained far more prosperous compared to its eastern wing.

The 1965 war seriously damaged much of the economic progress made since 1958, and further alienated the people of the eastern wing of the country.

Ayub’s military rule lasted 10 years after which he was forced out by a popular movement in both wings of the country. However, instead of the restoration of the political process, a second martial law was imposed in March 1969 with General Yahya heading the regime. The 1962 constitution was abrogated and, yet again, Pakistan was without a constitution. To the credit of General Yahya and his regime, Pakistan’s first general elections were held in December 1970. To this day, those elections are considered the fairest in our history.

The elections were surely free and fair, but the results provided the first glimpse of the alienation of the people of (former) East Pakistan. The Awami League led by Shaikh Mujibur Rehman won a landslide. But 100 percent of those seats came from the eastern wing, with virtually no representation of the party in (former) West Pakistan. The same was true for the PPP led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the western wing. The PPP had the majority in West Pakistan but not a single seat in East Pakistan.

Constitution-making was almost impossible with this kind of distribution of seats in the new assembly. If only the 1956 constitution had not been abrogated by General Ayub in 1958, perhaps the situation would not have been as grave.

In the absence of any consensus among the major political parties towards constitution-making, the crisis deepened as the military regime tried to resolve issues before parliament could meet. Finally, parliament was called on March 3, 1971 – almost three months after the election. The Awami League was bent upon a new constitution based on its six-point agenda; something that was simply unacceptable to Bhutto who refused to attend the session. Forced by the circumstances, the military regime postponed the assembly session. Reacting to this postponement, the Awami League started a civil disobedience movement in the eastern wing. Bangladeshi flags were now being hosted across the entire eastern wing and state authority simply collapsed. Between March 7 and 25, people belonging to the western part of the country were targeted and hundreds were killed. When all negotiations failed, as they were bound to, an army operation was launched on the night of March 25, 1971.

This was the last attempt to save the country from disintegration but surely there was no military solution. The problem needed a political solution but at this late stage even that was impossible to reach.

Today, 50 years on, Bangladesh has definitely made its mark as a regional economic power with strong democratic credentials – something we continue to cherish here in Pakistan.

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