



RESEARCH PAPER

**Youth Participation in the Politics of Pakistan: A Historical Review
(1947-1971)**

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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the historical patterns of the participation of youth in the politics of Pakistan. It is summed up that the political activities of the young Muslim students contributed in Pakistan Movement but instead of ruling Muslim League, opposition parties established their wings in young students that dominated the student politics in the first decade after Pakistan's creation. Political activities of Bengali nationalist youth of East Pakistan have been recorded in this paper as a leading factor in the separatism of East Pakistan. Likewise youth were in forefront during the movement that collapsed President Ayub Khan.

Introduction

The participation of youth in the politics of Pakistan has been one of the key factor in the political change. The historical study of youth's contribution in development of politics can help understanding the issues and styles of youth engagement in contemporary political struggle. To overview the style and impact of the youth's involvement in politics during first quarter of Pakistan, the participation of youth is assessed in three major movements namely; Pakistan Movement, the Bengali Nationalist Movement for the emancipation of Bengalis in East Pakistan and Movement for the overthrow of President General Ayub Khan. The following lines

present the historical account of youth's engagement and participation in the political activities.

Text

Muslim Youth played a vital role in political struggle for Pakistan. The young workers of Muslim League National Guards (MLNG), an organized daughter organization of All India Muslim League (AIML), the Muslim students from Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and Islamia Colleges of Lahore and Peshawar along with other universities, colleges and schools organized in Muslim Student Federations throughout India worked as vanguard of AIML. The Muslim Women Students' Federation was founded in 1941 and it organized different groups of Muslim women in several cities. (Mujahid, 2010) For details see Mukhtar Zaman, *Students' Role in Pakistan Movement* (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 1978); Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, *The Punjab Muslim Students Federation, 1937-1947* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1978) and Bedar Malik, *Faislah kun Ma'arkah* (Urdu) (Lahore: Pakistan Study Centre, Punjab University, 1987)

In the Indian elections 1945-46, student-canvassers of All India and Provincial Muslim Students Federations especially at AMU supported the AIML in its election campaign. (Ahmad W. , 2001) League's Secretary General Liaquat Ali Khan went to AMU some months before the elections and appealed to students to come out of their schools and colleges and work for the nation's freedom even if it entailed sacrificing a year of education. Raja Sahib Mahmudabad in his appeal to the students for participation in the electoral activities dismissed fears about loss of their academic time in comparison with the educative training in practical politics. (Dhulipala, 2015, pp. 422-24)

The students of AMU collected funds and canvassed for League candidates. (Dawn, 1945) They also set a training system for other young student-canvassers. In the Central Assembly elections these self-initiated student-motivators confined their activities to United Province without material support from Muslim League high command. The impact of student-canvassing on the success of the League in the central assembly elections made Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah realize their utility and he decided to utilize Aligarh students into the League's election campaign for elections to the provincial assemblies. (Dhulipala, 2015, pp. 422-25)

To make AIML successful in the elections thousands of student volunteers from AMU and other institutions fanned out throughout India to educate, mobilize and motivate the ordinary voters. (Mujahid, 2010) The active youth participation in elections thus proved to be important factor in the electoral victory of AIML. This was acknowledged by the high command of League. For instance, immediately after the results came; the Punjab Provincial Muslim League issued a statement praising the students' crucial role in its success. (Talbot, *The 1946 Punjab Elections*, 1980)

The policy of League to activate the students in politics was criticized in different circles. For example in June 1944 Governor Punjab projected the decision of League to strengthen its position through students as a devious move to further its objectives. (Sandhu & Mahmood, 2014) As soon as the goal of Pakistan was achieved Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah, looking the destructive attitude of some student organizations affiliated with political parties dangerous for the state, realized that young students should not participate in politics and must focus on their studies. At a public meeting in Dhaka on March 21, 1948, he said,

“My young friends, students who are present here,... let me give you this word of warning you will be making the greatest mistake if you allow yourself to be exploited by one political party or another.... Your main occupation should be – in fairness to yourself, in fairness to your parents, in fairness to the state - to devote your attention to your studies.” (Merchant, 2009)

After independence the lack of Muslim League leadership’s attention towards student participation in politics that is reflected from the above statement of Quaid-i-Azam was one reason, along with others like weakness of League organization itself, Muslim Students Federation faded. Within three years of the emergence of Pakistan the Muslim League stuttered that also dropped the popularity of MSF. The Communist Party organized Democratic Students' Federation (DSF) and the Jamaat-e-Islami sponsored Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba. (PILDAT, 2008)

DSF replaced the MSF across campuses especially in West Pakistan. The development of DSF worried the ruling party that considered it a dangerous development. In order to check the DSF, a state-sponsored student organization National Students' Federation (NSF) came into being. So DSF enhanced itself and dominated the student politics. In 1954, Muslim League government banned the Communist Party of Pakistan as well as DSF. (Nelson, 2011) Members of the banned DSF now turned to NSF which then became the main vehicle for leftist student politics.

Due to the involvement of Jamaat-e-Islami in anti-Ahmadi movement in 1952 the party went in direct confrontation with the state. Its youth wing ‘Jamiat’ also went in opposition to government. It ceased to view its task as the training of future leaders of Pakistan and instead saw itself as a 'soldiers' brigade, fighting for the cause of Islam against its enemies (secularists and leftists) inside and outside the government.” (Nasr, 1992)

Emergence of Bengali Nationalist Youth Organizations

In East Pakistan major political development from 1947 to 1971 took place with active youth participation. Soon after emergence of Pakistan the Bengali youth formed their youth organizations to render political activities. The very first of Bengali nationalist organizations was a youth political organization titled East Pakistan’s Freedom League (Gono Azadi League) (f. Dhaka, July 1947) (Zaheer, 1994,

p. 17). Progressive student-workers like Mohammad Toaha, Oli Ahead, Najmul Karim, Aziz Ahamd, Tassadduq Ahmad and Tajuddin Ahmad were its prominent young leaders. (Dil & Dil, 2000, p. 443) All of these leaders later on led the Bengali nationalist movement that founded Bangladesh.

Another Bengali nationalist youth organization, Democratic Youth League (DYL), emerged in a two-days workers conference that started on 6th September 1947. (Gupta, 1963, p. 29) The League brought out a bulletin titled *Democratic Youth League* edited by Akhlaqur Rahman and Ataur Rahman, leading Bengali political leaders later. The League unsuccessfully planned to organise another conference (Umar, 2004, p. 31) yet it held a large public gathering on 23 September 1947 in Dacca. (Chaudhry, 2005, p. 32) The League organized another youth conference in 1948 in Ishurdi and put several demands for the status of Bengali language. It raised voice for the development of Bengali culture and remained active in agitations as a communist front organization until government liquidated it. (Ahmad K. , 1970, p. 14)

Muslim Students' League renamed itself as East Pakistan Students' League in January 1948. (Islam, 1990, p. 120) This student's League later joined hands with dissatisfied elements of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League and formed Awami Muslim League, leading Bengli nationalist political party. A strong group of youth in AML opposed 'communal nomenclature' of Awami Muslim League and succeeded to get the word 'Muslim' removed from the name of the party "Awami League". (Bhuiyan, 1982, p. 23)

Most of the Bengali youth organizations took anti-government stance. Consequently some of them had to face official restrictions. Democratic Youth Federation, Mymensingh was closed down in six months. Most of its activists were arrested on charges of subversive activities. (Gupta, 1963, p. 29) The restrictions on the youth were coincided with violent actions on behalf of the young activists. Deputy High Commissioner of UK in Dhaka referred to an unconfirmed reported that in Munshiganj a group of about 100 youth had formed a 'suicide squad to get rid of the Ministers and students had vowed to force their way into the East Pakistan's Chief Minister's house. (Deputy High Commissioner for UK in Dacca, 1948)

The student organizations served as front organization of political parties. Communist Party that was banned in Pakistan on July 4, 1954 continued its activities through its front organizations among the students. (Zaheer, 1994, p. 16) Two student organizations - the Students League (affiliated with the AL) and the Students Union (affiliated with the NAP) - became the main vehicles for the expression of Bengali nationalist feelings. They observed 21 February each year as Martyrs' Day. They also prevented the implementation of the Report of the Commission on National education (1959). (Maniruzzaman T. , 1975, p. 35)

Bengali Youth's Participation in Politics through Attachment with Bengali Language

The youth of East Pakistan played a vital role in Bengali politico-cultural activism that rose during early fifties. Students emerged as a strong political force to launch pro-Bengali agitations. The students of Dhaka University led the Bengali language agitation under the guidance of their professors Kazi Mutahir Hussain and Abul Kasem and founded the "Tamaddun Majlis on 1st September 1947. The Majlis initiated an action committee that launched first language agitation in Dhaka in the close of 1947. The weekly organ of the Majlis, *Sainik*, supported the demands for Bengali language. (Umar, 2004, p. 31) (Kokab, *Separatism in Pakistan: A Study of Failed Leadership*, 2017)

The students of Dhaka denounced the official language policy on 24th February 1948 in a protest strike. The State Language Committee of Action (SLCA) set up with the objective of achieving national language status for Bengali was formed of representatives from youth organizations like the Gono Azadi League, Democratic Youth League, Tamaddun Majlis, Dhaka University Halls and East Pakistan Muslim Students League. The SLCA steered language agitations strike all over East Bengal from March 11 to March 16. (Zaheer, 1994, pp. 21-22) (Kokab & Abid, *Pakistani Leadership's Response to Linguo-Cultural Challenge in East Bengal*, 2014)

In January 1952, the students of Dhaka University took initiative to invoke Bengali language agitations. The opposition parties followed the students in leading these agitations at later stage. School and College students affiliated with Youth League, East Pakistan Muslim Students League, Dhaka University State Language Committee, Tammaddun Majlis, All East Pakistan Students League were included in the forty member All-party National Language Action Committee that steered these agitations. (Umar, 2004, pp. 192-93)

On 21 February 1952 the student demonstrators in Dhaka disobeyed government ban on public meetings and tried to throng the Assembly premises when its session was in progress. Due to police firing ended with casualty of four persons including three students. The deaths of youth initiated the regionalist politics in East Pakistan. A *Shaheed Minar* (Martyr's Monument) was built on death place that afterwards worked as a symbol of Bengali nationalism. The day, ever since, has been observed annually. Badruddin Umar views that language agitation, for the first time, turned the Bengali Muslims into Muslim Bengalis. This change in the sense of identity profoundly influenced the subsequent social, cultural and political developments of the people of East Bengal. (Islam, 1990) (Jahan, 1972) (Zaheer, 1994) (Umar, 2004, pp. 221-22)

The student community working with the politicians supplied the main driving force of the language agitation. The initiative of the students was reinforced gradually through the coming years with the peasants and workers and this became

manifest in the victory of Bengali nationalists in 1954 provincial election in East Bengal. (Bhuiyan, 1982) The youth continued their activities to popularize Bengali language that supported the Bengali nationalist political stances. EPSL launched a week-long campaign that began on February 14, 1966. The impact of street-corner meetings and widespread picketing of this program was that in an almost overnight all public signboards and nameplates were shifted to Bengali. (Jahan, 1972)

The demonstrations and campaigns on constitutional issues in early fifties had been another major mode of youth participation in politics in East Pakistan. There the students recorded their reaction on the constitutional proposals given by the committee formed to decide basic principles of the Constitution of Pakistan. Dhaka University Action Committee led the students of different colleges of Dhaka to observe demonstration and strike. Representatives of the Nikhil Purba Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League, Purba Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League, Students Federation and the female students of the Eden College participated the protests in capital and different cities of East Pakistan. (Umar, 2004)

Youth Resisting Martial Law of Ayub Khan

During the first year of martial law (1958) every democratic section of the country experienced the rough end. Student and youth activities also kept quiet. The National Students Federation (NSF) was banned and activism was absent from the campuses. But this was changed by mid-1960, when students in Lahore “staged a walkout from the examination hall, complaining that the constitutional law paper was too difficult and too long.” (Feldman, *Revolution in Pakistan: A Study of the Martial Law Administration*, 1967, p. 245)

Bengali Youth was the most important section in East Pakistan that challenged the martial law regime of Ayub Khan. The youth swiftly recorded their reaction to the presidential Constitution of 1962. They went on strike as early as it was introduced on 1st March 1962. (Maniruzzaman T. , 1975) They repeated the strike on 15 March 1962 and burnt the copies of the constitution. Their strike on 24 March prolonged for most part of the year. About two hundred students courted arrest during these demonstrations. (Bhuiyan, 1982, pp. 63-64) The demand to repeal 1962 Constitution was added with the demands of restoration of democracy and release of political workers including AL President H.S. Suhrawardy (Talbot, *Pakistan A Modern History*, 1999, p. 163) who was arrested on 30 January 1962.

Between 8 and 13 February there were demonstrations in Dacca, Barisal, Kushtia, Chittagong, Sylhet, Khulna, and Noakhali. In Noakhali, a railway train was stoned and passengers were injured. (Feldman, *Revolution in Pakistan: A Study of the Martial Law Administration*, 1967, p. 179) The demonstrations made President Ayub Khan confined to the President’s House during last three days of his visit to Dhaka. Troops had to be deployed in Dhaka University campus as police and other law enforcing agencies failed to restore law and order. (Talbot, *Pakistan A Modern History*, 1999)

One of the major reasons for the students' agitation was the University Ordinance that restricted the participation of students in political activities. Sick of Anti-government political activities of Dhaka University youth, the report of the Commission of National Education recommended greater governmental control over the University. The students observed 17 September 1962, as the Education Day and rejected the recommendations of the report and started violent demonstration throughout the province. The army had to be called to restore order. Ultimately the government accepted the demand of the students. (Bhuiyan, 1982, p. 67)

Bengali Youth Turned to Separatism

The Bengali student organizations were leading battalions of the Bengali Nationalist Movement. The alliance of major Bengali student organizations – East Pakistan Students League, East Pakistan Students Union (pro-Peking) East Pakistan Students Union (pro-Moscow) and National Students Federation – turned militant in 1968. (Maniruzzaman T. , 1980, p. 62) It galvanized spontaneous support from masses when on December 26, 1968 it introduced Eleven Point Programme which included among other things; introduction of postgraduate classes in the Jagannath college in Dacca; withdrawal of a book entitled *Pakistan Dresho Krishti* from the syllabi; improvement of science laboratories; secular education; reduction in the price of paper; release of student leaders and renaming East Pakistan to Bangladesh. (Malick & Hussain, 1992, p. 569) (Matinuddin, 1994, p. 116) The 11-Point program of young students was adopted by Awami League along with 6-points of Sheikh Mujib. These sought to radicalize Bengali politics in a way that had never happened before by arousing massive popular support. (Bhuiyan, 1982)

The youth led demonstrations in start of 1969 were evident of the incapacities of the Bengali political leaders who just followed the context of the agitations initiated by the young students. DAC declared 17 January as *Dabi Divas* (Demand Day) and 18 January as *Pratibad Divas* (Protest Day). A series of three strike-days came after the killing during a violent demonstration of a left-wing EPSU's student leader Assaduzzaman on 20 January. (The Pakistan Observer, 1969) Then 24th January was observed as the Mass Upsurge Day. The Bengali youth set East Pakistan Secretariat and the offices of the National Press Trust papers *Morning News* and *Danik Pakistan* on fire. The agitation was too strong that it almost paralyzed the whole administration of the province and army had to be called. Army opened fire on student demonstration on 18 February in which Dr. Shamsuzzoha, a Professor and Proctor at Rajshahi University, also died. Students observed Martyr Day on 21 February extra ordinarily that sparked off the fire of uprising all over East Pakistan. (Ahmed, 1978, p. 160) (Humayun, 1995) (The Pakistan Observer, 1969) (Rahman, 1979)

During disorder after resignation of Ayub Khan in March 1969, the head of the Dacca University Central Student Union was reportedly the de facto governor of East Pakistan. He formed student peace committees to maintain law and order and arbitrate industrial disputes. (Jahan, 1972, p. 174) Unlike the Bengali nationalist

political leaders the Bengali youth turned anti-Pakistan openly. The students of the Dacca University not only displayed the Bangladesh flag but also delivered fiery anti Pakistan speeches on Pakistan's Independence Day, 14 August 1969. (Humayun, 1995, p. 300) During September 1969 the young students went into direct confrontation with martial law authorities. In a meeting at *Shaheed Minar* they openly declared that the right slogan for East Pakistan was no longer *Pakistan zindabad*. The arrest orders of student leaders could not be implied as accused went underground and students threatened of strike if the arrest orders were carried out. (Feldman, The Herbert Feldman Omnibus: The End & the Beginning, 2001) (Rizvi, 1976, p. 22)

In the crisis after the victory of Awami League in elections of 1970 the Bengali nationalist students went more revolutionary than free of any command from senior political leadership. They observed the 11-Point Week that began on January 18, 1971 commemorating the killing of two students on the same date two years ago during Anti-Ayub Movement. (The Pakistan Observer, 1969) During the observance of the week certain student organizations like Purba Bangla Biplopi Chatra Union (East Bengal Revolutionary Students Union), Bangla Chatra League (Bengal Students League), East Pakistan Students League and others, escorting the political leaders and political parties, raised the slogans for complete independence for Bangladesh. They kept the elected representatives associated with programmes of Bengali nationalism. On the concluding day which was declared as "Mass-upsurge day", the students organized a public meeting at Paltan Maidan. In the meeting, Unur-e-Alam Siddique, the President, of the East Pakistan Students League (the Student front of the AL) declared solidarity with 11-Points and Six-Points Programmes. (Humayun, 1995, p. 345)

The Bengali youth was main militant element of Mukti Bahini, Bengali militant organization that fought the civil war against Pakistan Army after 25 March 1971. Awami League's student youth resorted to join paramilitary force for political gains. In mid-March 1971, four leaders of the Awami League-affiliated Student League formed a Shadhin Bangal Kendriya Sangram Parisad (independent Bangladesh central students' union) and started a program of paramilitary training on the campus of the Dhaka University and at other educational institutions. (Jahan, 1972, p. 196)

The pattern of youth participation in politics of East Pakistan marks that the participation of youth in politics in an authoritarian system increases the demands for democratic set-up. Such demands unfulfilled heighten the discontent in the youth and society that leads to violence and disorder. Such discontent ultimately promotes anti-state aspirations like separatism. The youth organizations emerged in early days of Pakistan demanded the national status for Bengali language. Encouraged with the outcome of language agitation in the form of victory in 1954 provincial elections they moved forward to create political affiliations on cultural grounds throughout East Pakistan. The military dictatorship called their attention to the civil and constitutional liberties. In the bad economic situations and refusal in

granting them concessions the youth came to conclude that separatism must be the goal of their political struggle for the democracy.

Youth in Anti-Ayub Movement

The scorn of young Pakistani students with President Ayub Khan had started to manifest after the Tashkent Accord in 1966. A combined left-right movement was also raised at the Tashkent declaration where youth alleged that President Ayub had lost what had been won in war with India in 1965. (Feldman, *The Toppling of Ayub Khan*, 1969)

In mid-1968 the students again rose against Ayub Khan. Pakistani students occupied the Pakistani High Commission London for three hours during first week of July 1968. They told they were planning a series of militant demonstrations in protest against the suppression of civil liberties in Pakistan. Mr Subid Ali, president of the Pakistan Students Federation explained that only by militant action could they draw public attention to the retention of 2000 political prisoners in Pakistan. The students in conjunction with the East Pakistan Defence Front, planned to hold their first demonstration today, starting from Speaker's Corner and marching to the High Commission. Another demonstration was to be held when Ayub visited UK on 22 July. (*The Observer*, 1968) The student riots in Dacca University led to closure of the university sine die on October 22, 1968. (Maniruzzaman T. , 1975)

The 1968-69 mass eruption that was labeled by Tariq Ali as 'the first generalized popular manifestation in the history of the country, going far deeper than the Muslim League agitation of the forties' was triggered by the young students. Almost five months from November 1968 to March 1969 youth uprising was seen all over Pakistan. "Not a day passed...without some kind of civil disturbance, riot, strike, bloodshed, or demonstration." (Feldman, *The Toppling of Ayub Khan*, 1969) For the month of November, the students of West Pakistan struggled on their own. In December, they were joined by workers in the West and by workers and students in East Pakistan. (Ali, 1983, p. 81) On November 7, police opened fire to disperse a crowd of 3000 students defying a ban on public meetings to welcome the leader of PPP ZA Bhutto. Schools in Karachi, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Peshawar were closed and a curfew imposed on the cities. (*Chronology*, 1969, p. 74)

Clashes between students and the police in Rawalpindi in which one demonstrator was killed sparked the countrywide violence. On 10 November a student attempted to assassinate President Ayub Khan when he was addressing a public meeting in Peshawar. Z.A. Bhutto, then, threw his considerable weight behind the student-led disturbances which spread like wildfire in the towns and cities of the north-west Punjab. The mood of young students and workers in both parts of Pakistan was one of extreme self-confidence. They believed they could change everything. They thought that their actions would dictate the future history of Pakistan. (Ali, 1983, p. 80)

The student left that was at the forefront included Young Peoples' Front (YPF), National Student Organization (Punjab), NSF (Punjab, Karachi Sind, NWFP), Tanzeem-i-Talabai Pakistan (Student Organization Pakistan), Independent Student League, and Peoples Student Federation. Unable to create the province-wide student organizations that had existed in East Pakistan, the movement in West Pakistan was taken over by political leaders who had fallen out with Ayub Khan but who, in turn, were not able to provide direction to the students. Since numerous student organizations sprang up at this time, it was decided by the prominent student unions to form a Student Action Committee (SAC) in Lahore and in Dacca in early January 1969. (Khan, 2014, p. 354)

On November 13, Bhutto and 14 other opposition leaders were arrested on charges of inciting West Pakistanis, especially students, to violence. Governor of West Pakistan Musa said that the arrested leaders had tried "to disrupt law and order as well as the administration of the province with one blow". Starting from the demands that the 1960 ordinance restricting public meetings be repealed (Chronology, 1969) the student activists moved to broader demands of the change of system. Ayub Khan, in his first public reaction to three weeks of agitations, said that he had ordered immediate steps to amend the rigid university ordinance which had angered the student union for years because of its restriction on student political activity. He omitted a reference to the more political demands which brought the students on the streets. Demands for political reforms and for the release of Bhutto were ignored. (The Times, 1968)

The students not only took part in the movement but also had full attention on its development and outcome. On 2 February the student leaders condemned the talks between opposition and government. Forty Pakistani students in London began a day-long demonstration against government. Two of them hoisted black flag over the building of Pakistani High Commission. (A Major Student Victory, 1969) On the announcement of President Ayub, exhausted of 15 week agitation against his rule on 20 February 1969, that he would not contest election for next term throwing their caps in the air, students performed victory dances in the streets of Rawalpindi shouting "revolution has won". (The Times, 1969)

Conclusion

During the first twenty four years of Pakistan, its youth, mainly the students, actively participated in the mainstream politics in addition to the activities rendered to control in-campus politics. Starting from canvassing in the elections for Pakistan the student youth political shifted to the politics of opposition in both parts of newly established countries. In Eastern part they became the vanguards of separatism leading the Bengali nationalist political leadership in all major events of significance. In West Pakistan the youngsters appeared forerunners when tables were turned especially in the movement that ended with end of eleven years of reign of President Ayub Khan.

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