

FIVE

TOWARD THE WATERSHED OF 1971

DURING A VISIT TO DHAKA in the late summer of 1968, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared Bengali demands for provincial autonomy to be in the best interests of the country. He assailed civil bureaucrats, the CSP in particular, for treating the people of the eastern wing as “Kala Admees,” literally black men. This derogatory attitude had misled the government into implicating Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Agartala Conspiracy Case when they might have tried negotiating with him. Self-interested quarters in West Pakistan had started attacking the Awami League’s demands the moment they were announced by Mujib without examining their merits and demerits. Bhutto regretted that Mujib had refused his invitation to debate the six points set forth in public. Only two of the six points were “totally unacceptable” to the PPP leader, who was prepared to discuss the others in order to “remove doubts and misgivings.” He urged the government to “find some political solution of the problem” as “such issues cannot be solved with force.”¹

Three years later, when the golden hues of eastern Bengal’s lush green landscape had been turned red with the steely might of oppression, the sharp-witted Bhutto stood knee deep in the bloodshed in East Pakistan alongside the leadership of a hated military junta. Upon returning to Karachi from Dhaka after the military crackdown on the night of March 25, 1971, the former foreign minister thanked the Almighty for saving Pakistan. He defended the military action publicly and accused Mujibur Rahman of conspiring with India to dismember the country. In private, he conveyed to Yahya Khan that even if limited military action had been found necessary to counter the threat of secession, a resolution of the crisis demanded

a political solution that gave the people of the eastern wing their due share of both political and economic power. "If the correct course is not followed," Bhutto wrote in a memo to Yahya Khan, "why should East Pakistanis want to stay as part of Pakistan—what stake would they have left in Pakistan with their due rights denied to them?" Bhutto warned Yahya against projecting discredited Bengali politicians and strongly recommended providing economic relief to the rural populace of East Pakistan who had not yet been swept away by the Awami League's propaganda. It was dangerous to create a situation in which the government was left facing "a hostile public in both Wings during this national crisis, particularly when India is waiting to take advantage of the situation."²

The military regime was disinclined to countenance civilian rule until the successful conclusion of the counterinsurgency operations in East Pakistan. Mindful of the risks involved in attacking the junta, Bhutto confined himself to calling for a transfer of power in the west, which he defined as democratization to deflect criticisms of his thirst for power. Similar steps were to be taken in the eastern wing whenever circumstances became conducive. Despite clear differences in their stances, Bhutto has come to be regarded as Yahya Khan's accomplice in the making of the colossal human tragedy that culminated in the breakup of Pakistan in December 1971. Bhutto vehemently denied the charge. His differences with Mujibur Rahman were "not in the nature of a power struggle" but "a struggle of conflicting equities." For the Awami League leader, "equity lay in an independent Bengal, . . . for me in the retention of Pakistan." Mujib claimed that the six points were the property of the people of the eastern wing. For Bhutto, "Pakistan was the property of the people" and the Awami League's demands a "concealed formula for secession." It was in this that "our points of view clashed."³

The question of who ultimately was responsible for the 1971 debacle has spawned a rich harvest of commentary. At the political level, the debate on the causes of Pakistan's disintegration has three sides to it in much the same way as the one about India's partition. The Pakistani Army might be seen as replacing the British at the base of the triangle, with Bhutto and Mujib substituting the Muslim League and the Congress as its two sides. As in 1947, the primary hurdle in the way of a mutually acceptable arrangement was how power was to be shared between the main political contenders within a federal state. The similarities between 1947 and 1971 should not be allowed to

obfuscate the key difference between them. Unlike the British, who were transferring power before leaving the subcontinent, the Pakistani Army wanted to secure its own interests before passing the mantle to the victorious political parties. Despite the army's self-interest in the outcome of the negotiations with the Awami League, a powerful current of popular opinion in Pakistan and Bangladesh has held that Bhutto in his greed for power bamboozled a mentally and physically unfit Yahya Khan into dismembering the country. On this view, a conniving and unprincipled politician tricked the army into committing national suicide. Although there may be some merit in this view, the events of 1971 also had a fourth dimension in the form of India's role, which had a direct bearing on the Pakistani Army's calculations. To make sense of the single most important watershed in the subcontinent's postindependence history, therefore, requires tracing the evolution of the Awami League's demands for provincial autonomy within the context of the formation and consolidation of Pakistan's military-bureaucratic state structure.

The crisis in East Pakistan had a much longer history than the twelve weeks of post-1970 electoral machinations orchestrated by Bhutto and the military top brass. Even before the creation of Pakistan, there were doubts about the viability of a country separated by a thousand miles with two wings that had nothing in common except adherence to the same religion. Eastern Bengal had formed no part of Muhammad Iqbal's conception of a Muslim homeland. The Lahore resolution of 1940 had spoken of more than one Muslim state in the northwestern and northeastern parts of the subcontinent. On the eve of partition, Jinnah himself had given his blessing to the idea of a united and independent Bengal, commenting that he was certain that it would be on very good terms with Pakistan. Soon after partition, however, Jinnah spoke glowingly of East Bengal as "the most important component of Pakistan, inhabited as it is by the largest single bloc of Muslims in the world." He left no scope for anyone to doubt that the new state was determined to keep its two wings together: "those people who still dream of getting back East Bengal into the Indian Union are living in a dream-land."⁴

The Politics of Denial

Starting its independent career without the semblance of a center, Pakistan showed its determination to parry external and internal threats to its

survival by developing an elaborate hydra-like state structure during the first two and a half decades of its existence. Steeped in the classical tradition of colonial bureaucratic authoritarianism, the state sought to penetrate society, extract resources from the economy and manipulate the polity rather than devolve responsibilities or serve as a two-way channel of communication between the rulers and the ruled. The early demise of representative political processes shored up the centralizing logic of bureaucratic authoritarianism, replacing the democratic requirements of consensus with the dictatorial methods of coercion. The primacy of the central state in all spheres of a society characterized by regional heterogeneities and economic disparities generated rancor among the constituent units, breeding a web of political intrigue and instability that affected the functioning of state authority at the local and the provincial levels.

Unable to reconcile the imperatives of state building with those of nation building, successive ruling combinations tried to gain legitimacy by playing up the Indian threat and paying lip service to a vaguely defined Islamic ideology. With a narrowly construed security paradigm defining the center's conception of national interest, the perspective of the provinces was sidelined, if not altogether ignored. Rumbblings of protest in the provinces were put down with an iron fist or given short shrift by invoking the common bond of religion. Islam in the service of a military authoritarian state proved to be divisive. Far from unifying a people fractured along regional and class lines, the state's use of religion encouraged self-styled ideologues of Islam to nurture hopes of one day storming the citadels of the Muslim state. The great populist poet Habib Jalib poured scorn on the state's appropriation of Islam to promote national unity. "Islam Is Not In Danger," he cried out in a memorable poem. It was the idle rich, the exploiters of the peasantry and labor, the thieves, tricksters, and traitors in league with Western capitalists who were endangered.⁵

Proponents of such populist ideas were hounded and winnowed out. With the press in chains and civil society the target of novel forms of social and political engineering, the odds were stacked against the advocates of democracy. After derailing the political process in 1958, the military-bureaucratic establishment tried securing its bases of support. This meant bypassing political parties and using state power to bring segments of dominant socioeconomic groups under the regime's sway through differential patronage and selective mobilization. During the heyday of

modernization theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Pakistan under military rule was hailed in some quarters in the West as a model of social harmony and political stability in the developing world. These expectations were sorely belied by the realities on the ground. The methods employed to construct and consolidate the state exacerbated provincial grievances, with dire consequences for Pakistan's political stability and tenuous federal equation. State-sponsored processes of political inclusion and exclusion, the economics of functional inequality, and neglect of regional disparities made it increasingly difficult to administer two geographically separate parts, triggering the ignominious downfall of two military regimes and sowing the seeds of the disintegration of the country.

The breakup of Pakistan was the result of the autocratic policies of its state managers rather than the inherent difficulties involved in welding together linguistically and culturally diverse constituent units. Islam proved to be dubious cement not because it was unimportant to people in the different regions. Pakistan's regional cultures have absorbed Islam without losing affinity to local languages and customs. With some justification, non-Punjabi provinces came to perceive the use of Islam as a wily attempt by the Punjabi-led military-bureaucratic combine to deprive them of a fair share of political and economic power. Non-Punjabi antipathy toward a Punjabi-dominated center often found expression in assertions of regional distinctiveness. But politics more than cultural difference stoked regional resentments. Clarion calls for provincial autonomy were effectively demands for better job opportunities, basic social services, and a larger cut of state finances.

Here the fault lines in the Pakistani state structure played a decisive role. The demands of the military establishment on the state's meager resources left little for development in the provinces. Seeing India as a near and present danger, the military-bureaucratic establishment used Pakistan's geostrategic location to attract American military and economic assistance in return for supporting Washington's Cold War agenda. Once a partnership had been struck with the United States, a security-conscious state fostered a political economy characterized by high defense and low development expenditure. The primary goal of the state's development initiatives was to enhance revenue rather than social welfare—a process that saw the nonelected institutions edging out the elected institutions in

the struggle for dominance in the new state. These nonelected institutions carried a legacy of uneven recruitment patterns from the colonial era, compounding the difficulties in integrating diverse linguistic and socio-economic groups.

An overarching reason for the Pakistani state's faltering steps in the quest for social support and legitimacy was that the federal center came to represent the interests of the dominant nonelected institutions more effectively than those of the regional socioeconomic groups to which at different stages it was loosely tied. Apart from extending patronage to its functionaries and locating them in key sectors of the economy, the state defined the field of political privilege. In the absence of democratic politics, the dominance of a predominantly Punjabi civil bureaucracy and army heightened the grievances of non-Punjabi provinces and the linguistic groups within them. The entrenched institutional supremacy of a Punjabi army and federal bureaucracy, not Punjab's dominance over other provinces per se, had emerged as the principal impediment to restoring democratic processes in Pakistan. In the face of chronic tensions between the center and the regions, the religious glue of Islam alone could not bind a diverse and disparate people into a nation.

The proposed homeland for India's Muslims was envisaged in the Lahore resolution of 1940 as a federation of "sovereign" and "autonomous" units. This hint of confederalism quickly fell by the wayside in the heady aftermath of 1947. The first requirement of the new government in Karachi was to establish its writ over two geographically distinct constituent units. In the absence of a preexisting central apparatus and effective political party machinery in the provinces, pragmatism was the better option. The Government of India Act of 1935 was adapted as the provisional constitution and later made the bedrock of the 1956 and the 1962 constitutions. Aimed at perpetuating, not terminating, colonial rule, the Act of 1935 retained certain unitary features of the British Indian state to counterbalance the concessions to federalism. Unlike most federal systems of government, the constituent units were made subject to a single constitution. The federal center arrogated superior powers in legislative, financial, and political matters. Soon after independence, the provinces were deprived of the financial autonomy granted to them under the act and made dependent on central handouts which, given the severe shortage of funds, were wholly inadequate for their development needs.

The future course of democracy was imperiled in a country whose federal configuration to begin with consisted of fifteen different entities—five provinces and ten princely states—of vastly uneven size and political importance. Troubled by the political implications of an overall Bengali majority in the federation, officialdom in West Pakistan gave enthusiastic support to the merger of the western wing under the one-unit scheme. Unlike the western wing, with its heterogeneities, East Bengal was in relative terms linguistically and culturally homogeneous. It was also politically more volatile than parts of West Pakistan. Bengalis felt passionately about their autonomy and were prone to leftist ideologies and sporadic bouts of violence. They resented the use of their hard-earned foreign exchange to beef up a military establishment wedded to the curious strategic doctrine of defending the eastern wing from West Pakistan. Seeing an Indian hand in Bengali demands for provincial autonomy, the federal government declared them seditious and, in turn, used this to justify its centralizing and homogenizing designs. But neither the threat of India nor the allure of Islam could save the center from the wrath of constituent units reduced to being hapless appendages in a state that was federal in form and unitary in substance.

If East Bengal was a thorn in the side of the federal establishment, the fourteen units composing the western wing presented a political and constitutional conundrum. Most of the princely states claimed some semblance of sovereignty and had to be cajoled and coerced into acceding to Pakistan before being summarily bundled into the one-unit scheme of October 1955. Those that resisted—Kalat, for instance—were clobbered with an iron hand. As the largest of the tribal states in Balochistan, Kalat enjoyed the allegiance of tribal chiefs who, though monitored by the British resident in Quetta, had retained autonomy over their local affairs during the colonial period. The Pakistani center's encroachments on Balochistan threatened to alter a jealously guarded status quo. Sporadic eruptions of armed insurgency became a recurrent feature of politics in Balochistan. This was not too difficult given the impoverishment of the people and the absence of the most rudimentary forms of infrastructure for the economic development of the province. During the 1960s, Sher Mohammad Marri spearheaded the resistance under the umbrella of the Baloch Liberation Front. The battles fought by the Pakistani Army in the rugged terrain of Balochistan shaped its institutional psyche in decisive

ways. Baloch nationalists were labeled “miscreants” working hand in glove with either Afghanistan or the country’s premier enemy. This perception did not remain confined to the military. Tarring regional demands with the Indian brush became such an entrenched part of the official discourse of nationalism in Pakistan that the managers of the centralized state regarded legitimate demands for provincial autonomy with deep suspicion.

Consequently, even in the relatively quiescent parts of West Pakistan, there was no love lost for an unresponsive center that continued swallowing up larger and larger chunks of provincial revenues without contributing much for the development of local infrastructure and social welfare. The massive demographic changes accompanying partition strained the limited administrative capacities of Punjab and Sindh to breaking point. While the exodus of non-Muslims disrupted the economic and educational networks in these provinces, accommodating the bulk of the 7.2 million Muslim refugees from India within a short span of time was impossible without the sustained help of the central government. Preoccupied with matters of defense and its own political survival, Karachi’s assistance to the provinces fell well short of expectations. In the absence of funds and efficient administrative solutions, the rehabilitation of refugees was quickly transformed into an explosive political issue. Several provincial politicians used it to chip away at the center’s uncertain authority.

Accounting for 10 percent of Pakistan’s population by 1951, the refugees permanently altered the political landscape of Punjab and Sindh. Despite taking in a much larger percentage of Muslims fleeing parts of East Punjab ravaged by violence, Punjab had a relatively easier time absorbing the mainly Punjabi-speaking migrants into its social fabric.⁶ By contrast, the influx of mainly Urdu-speaking migrants into Sindh created a clutch of political and cultural problems for the provincial administration. More than half a million refugees came to Sindh during the initial years of independence. Almost two-thirds of them opted for urban centers like Karachi and Hyderabad while the remainder settled in the rural areas of this overwhelmingly agricultural province. In principle, the incoming migrants were expected to replace the non-Muslims in both the urban and the rural areas. However, the problem of resettlement was far more complicated and the ensuing tensions between local Sindhis and the newcomers much fiercer than in Punjab. For one thing, the outflow of Hindus to

India was slower in Sindh than in Punjab.⁷ For another, some of the more powerful Sindhi Muslim landlords are said to have grabbed nearly two-thirds of the agricultural land vacated by Hindus before migrants from UP, Hyderabad Deccan, or East Punjab could make their presence felt. The situation was particularly fraught in Karachi, a thriving cosmopolitan city of 400,000 in 1947, but one in which construction activity had not kept pace with the growth in population due to World War II. The preferred destination for a majority of uprooted Urdu-speakers from north India's urban areas, Karachi had thinly spread municipal facilities, whether for health, communications, water supply, electric power, or housing, that were incapable of bearing the burden of its new population.

The sheer pace of the sociocultural and political transformation of Sindh can be seen by the jump in the number of Urdu speakers from a mere 1 percent of the population in 1947 to 12 percent by the time of the 1951 census. With just a sprinkle of Urdu speakers at the time of partition, Karachi by the late 1950s had become a migrant city with more than half of its population claiming Urdu as their mother tongue. This would not have been possible if the provincial government had succeeded in getting its way. Within a year or so of partition, relations between the center and the Sindh government had nose-dived over the forcible separation of Karachi from the province. Justified on the grounds of national interest, the loss of Karachi rankled the Sindhis all the more because they were not compensated for the loss of the province's primary revenue earner. Under the circumstances, the center's advocacy of the Urdu-speaking migrants' right to space, gainful employment, and adequate political representation was perceived as a deep-seated conspiracy to displace Sindhis from a position of dominance in their own province. The center's preference for authoritarian methods over democratic ones even during the first decade after independence only confirmed the worst fears of the Sindhis. Calling themselves *muhajirs*, or refugees after the early community of Islam that migrated from Mecca to Medina, the Urdu speakers believed that their sacrifices of life and property for Pakistan entitled them to a privileged position in the new state. Lacking a provincial base of their own, the class, occupational, and emotional profile of many Urdu speakers made them particularly susceptible to the appeal to religion by self-styled "Islamist" parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the JUP, which had made Karachi the focus of their oppositional politics. Paradoxically enough, their religious

pretensions and claims of cultural superiority over other linguistic groups suited a West Pakistani establishment, harping on the Islamic identity of Pakistan and Urdu as the cultural motif of its national unity, much more than political parties with provincial bases of support.

The concordat between the center and the better-educated Urdu-speaking *muhajirs*, many of whom held top positions in the federal bureaucracy, had large implications for Pakistani politics. Even before the first military takeover of 1958, the migrants' success in creating a social and political niche for themselves, especially in Karachi, was intensely resented not only by Sindhis but also by Punjabis, Pathans, Gujaratis, and Balochis who had come to the city looking for employment and a better quality of life. Antipathy toward the Urdu-speaking migrants was not a facet of the Sindhi sociopolitical scene alone. It extended to other provinces where the educated classes felt slighted by the cultural pretensions of the Urdu speakers. This was true even of those members of the urban Punjabi middle and upper classes who accepted Urdu as their lingua franca in the interest of national cohesion. Urdu was much less prevalent in the NWFP and Balochistan. The Pathan provincial elite gradually took to it for pragmatic reasons without abandoning their own mother tongue, Pashto. In Balochistan, Urdu was resisted as an alien imposition by a rapacious and indifferent center.

The suspension of democratic government in October 1958 gave a fillip to these sentiments and, in turn, provoked the center into taking draconian measures in the name of national unity. Disgruntled politicians with regional bases of support were either locked out of Ayub's bureaucratically controlled political system or locked up in jail on various grounds. Pakistan under military rule flouted the elementary norms of federalism, accentuating strains in center-province relations. As the nonelected institutions were the main beneficiaries of administrative centralization and democratic denial, their overwhelmingly Punjabi character caused bitterness among non-Punjabis. Unable to allocate financial resources equitably to the provinces and unwilling to grant them their share of power, the federal union of Pakistan was built on a fragile branch that was liable to break under the weight of its own contradictions.

To prevent this eventuality, steps had been taken as early as 1949 to placate the non-Punjabi provinces by instituting a quota system for recruitment to the federal government services. This failed to provide adequate,

far less equitable, representation to the provinces or the linguistic minorities within them. Instead of correcting centrifugal trends, a centralization drive by an administrative bureaucracy dominated by Punjabis and Urdu speakers fanned provincialism. Bengalis led the non-Punjabi charge in demanding better representation in the civil, diplomatic, and armed services. The federal center was accused of pursuing policies of internal colonization by posting Punjabi and Urdu-speaking civil servants to the non-Punjabi provinces to pilfer their meager share of resources. Instead of consulting with the provinces or making a prior reference to the legislature, the federal center soon after independence had temporarily withheld the share out of income tax. In an audacious move, the center arbitrarily took away the right of the provinces to collect the sales tax, the single most elastic source of their revenue. Justified in the name of national interest, the center's monopolization of the entire gamut of fiscal and financial arrangements to pay for a debilitating defense burden extinguished such hopes as existed of generating a measure of federal bonhomie.

The nub of Bengali hostility toward the West Pakistani establishment was the pernicious logic of functional inequality. Once militarization and industrialization became the twin pillars of Pakistani officialdom's developmental rhetoric, an astonishing range of special concessions were offered to West Pakistani-based business families at the expense of the agricultural sector in East Pakistan. Raw jute grown in the eastern wing was the leading foreign exchange earner during Pakistan's first decade of independence. In the fall of 1949, Pakistan exercised its financial sovereignty by refusing to follow the example of Britain and India and devaluing its currency. As the center's economic wizards had correctly calculated, this boosted export earnings by nearly 40 percent. The nondevaluation decision brought down jute and wheat prices while those of other essential commodities increased. By imposing heavy export duties to the detriment of agriculture, the central government augmented its foreign exchange reserves. The additional foreign exchange was used to finance the defense procurement effort and the industrialization of West Pakistan. Bengali grumbles about being used as a milk cow for the security and development of the western wing were dismissed or conveniently misread as evidence of secessionist and pro-Indian tendencies.

So long as even the most compromised form of a federal parliamentary system was in place, it was impossible to leave the provinces completely in

the financial lurch. Soon after the controversial erosion of provincial fiscal rights, the central government entered into negotiations with the provinces to arrive at a more mutually acceptable allocation of financial resources. An official of the Australian treasury, Jeremy Raisman, had been asked by the Pakistani government to examine the existing financial arrangements between the center and the provinces. In January 1952, the Raisman Report increased the provincial proportion of federal finances. It gave East Bengal just under two-thirds of the export duty on raw jute but turned down Punjabi and Sindhi requests for a cut in the export duties in view of the federal government's precarious financial position. Raisman also rejected provincial demands that the sales tax should be distributed among them and not shared between them and the center. Although a positive development in an otherwise grim federal landscape, the Raisman Award did not go far enough in alleviating center-region frictions over the all-important issue of financial autonomy.

If the center's tight-fistedness could be justified in the light of the strategic and economic consequences of partition, its overbearing attitude toward the cultural sensitivities of the provinces was inexcusable. There were powerful undercurrents of cultural alienation in provincial demands for autonomy. Bengali outrage at the center's Urdu-only language policy was just the tip of the iceberg, concealing a deep-seated resentment at the marginalization of their culture in the emerging narratives of the Pakistani nation. The wounded pride of the Bengalis had met with a rude shock on February 21, 1952, when the center's crackdown on the student-led language movement in Dhaka led to the killing of four students and injured several more. Commemorated as Martyrs' Day by Bengalis ever since, the incident is thought to have marked the beginning of the politics of dissent that culminated in Bangladeshi nationalism and independence. Bengali linguistic nationalism, however, was one among several factors that led eventually to the breakup of Pakistan.

Bengalis were not alone in feeling aggrieved by the center's imposition of Urdu as the official language. A section of Punjabis, belonging mostly to the lower and less well-off middle classes, bemoaned the loss of their linguistic tradition in the rush to embrace Urdu. They felt alienated by the state's artificial attempts to imitate the mores of the Mughal court. Their opposition was not to Urdu but to its patronage by the federal center at the expense of Punjabi, a language with a rich and vibrant oral and written

literary history spanning a thousand years.⁸ Confusing cultural assertion with parochialism, the central government harassed Punjabi intellectuals working to promote their regional language, declaring the more recalcitrant among them as “antistate.” The suspension of parliamentary government in 1958 dealt a hammer blow to regional linguistic aspirations not only in Punjab but also in the non-Punjabi provinces. Fancying himself as the great unifier, General Ayub suppressed regional literary associations, dubbing some of them as extensions of the banned Communist Party.⁹

State coercion could at best curb the growth of mass-based language movements, not dilute the enthusiasm of the more ardent protagonists of linguistic regionalism. Bengalis defied the government’s crude attempts to prevent them from celebrating the birthday of the revered Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. The ban on his works in the state-controlled media heightened Tagore’s appeal as a symbol of Bengali resistance against an intrusive and dictatorial center. Bengali writers and poets used Tagore, along with socialist and communist themes, to highlight the exploitation of East Pakistan and attack the state’s Islamic ideology. In West Pakistan, too, regional languages like Punjabi, Pashto, and Sindhi continued to expand their readership by increasing their literary production independently of the state. Advertising the risks of forcibly regimenting cultural traditions, Urdu came to be seen as an alien implant at the service of a neoimperialist agenda.

The center’s myopic handling of provincial sensibilities on language was matched by ham-handed attempts at marshaling Islam in the cause of nation building. With the religious ideologues agitating for the introduction of the sharia, senior bureaucrats set about feverishly establishing the religious credentials of the state. The result was a strange convergence of interest between an authoritarian center, besieged by a crescendo of demands for provincial autonomy, and a spectrum of Islamic ideologues looking for ways to squeeze through the woodwork to the apex of state power. Although it is possible to exaggerate the extent of the symbiosis between these two distinct forces, the state’s emphasis on its religious identity lent greater legitimacy to the would-be ideologues of Islam than the ground realities merited.¹⁰ But there was a world of difference between using religious preachers to advance the state’s homogenizing logic and a commitment to turning Pakistan into a conservative, hidebound Islamic state modeled on a narrowly construed reading of Islam.

Ever since the Objectives Resolution of 1949—ostensibly a victory for modernist interpretations of Islam—the so-called religious parties had chastised the state overlords for not living up to the ideals of Islam. Mawdudi, the leader of the Jamaat-i-Islami, lent ideological starch to this argument. In his opinion, it was the duty of a state created in the name of Islam to mold the hearts and minds of its citizens according to the tenets of their religion.¹¹ There was no scope for citizens to influence or contest the state's understanding of Islam. Mawdudi defended this on the grounds that because sovereignty in an Islamic state was vested in Allah, such perfect justice and equity will prevail that dissent would amount to apostasy. The Jamaat ideologue had pretensions about pressing his credentials as an Islamic scholar with infallible authority to interpret the divine will. Consistent with his view of the state in Islam as a spiritual democracy, Iqbal had proposed reposing that authority in an elected Parliament. In Mawdudi's authoritarian conception of the Islamic state, there was no possibility of Parliament debating, far less defining, God's will. Muslims not conforming to his idea of Islam were implicitly excluded from Mawdudi's definition of a believer. In another significant departure from the poetic visionary of Pakistan, who had held that the idea of the state was not dominant in Islam, Mawdudi considered the acquisition of state power vital to attain the ideal Islamic way of life. He proposed a jihad to seize state power and declared the lesser jihad (against the enemies of Islam) to be more important than the greater jihad (with one's inner self). Jihad was justified against internal Muslim "others" quite as much as against non-Muslims, sharpening the edges of the fault lines in the battle for the soul of Pakistan. There was no place in this scheme of things for any mutually negotiated coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Islamic state was the ideological embodiment of Muslim belief in one God and the Prophet Muhammad. Consequently, non-Muslims had to be debarred from holding key positions of responsibility. The same logic led Mawdudi to propose that Indian Muslims, a rump of a once significant community, had no choice but to live according to the dictates of the Hindu-majority community.

Mawdudi's idea of indoctrination and his strident anti-Indian rhetoric coupled with an insistence on Islam held out attractions for a military-dominated state. However, there was no question of the decision makers in the military and the civil bureaucracy letting the clerics rule the

Islamic roost. During Ayub Khan's era of enlightened Islam, *Mawdudism* became a word of execration and also fear. The religious lobby's potential to kick up a popular storm to the detriment of an authoritarian regime fully dawned on the general within years of his usurpation of state power. Moon sighting for the Muslim festival of Eid was a source of contention among the believers, with the clerics using it as an opportunity to enhance their public reach. When the Ayub regime tried rationalizing the process in 1967 by setting up a committee that proceeded to announce a day for Eid, the ulema led by Mawdudi protested this unwarranted intervention by the state in a sphere they regarded as their exclusive preserve. Five of them were quickly put behind bars, including Mawdudi, and the press prohibited from reporting on the matter. Throughout the Ayub era, Mawdudi bore the brunt of the state's coercive apparatus and was dragged through the courts in lengthy and financially withering legal battles. Ayub vented his fury against the Jamaat leader, calling him a "traitor and true enemy of Islam." "In any other country," the dictator opined, "[Mawdudi] would have been lynched like a dog, but in Pakistan we have rule of law of which the traitors take full advantage and protection."¹²

A gaggle of senior civil bureaucrats close to Ayub's way of thinking set about conjuring up the idioms of an Islamic ideology designed to expedite national integration rather than any visible kind of religiosity. What ensued was a scrappy tug-of-war between self-styled ideologues at the helm of state power and the bearded legions with their prayer rosaries, whether in the mosques, seminaries, or the streets, over the authority to interpret the message of Islam. Among the main casualties of the struggle was the center-province equation, with dire consequences for the federation. The state's recourse to religion was designed to counter claims based on cultural diversity and difference. Intended to facilitate unity among Pakistan's diverse regions, cynical uses of Islam served to undermine any sort of consensus on national identity. For a largely destitute populace seeking to eke out a decent living, matters to do with Islam's ritualistic, doctrinal, and spiritual aspects were not the primary issue. Singling out Islam as the only thread in the intricate regional weave of Pakistan's national identity was a crudely conceived policy of homogenization through which the military-bureaucratic state succeeded in making an issue out of a non-issue. A citizenry more in tune with the eclectic and varied social makeup of the country was quite comfortable wearing multiple affinities of region,

religion, and nation. Policies of national indoctrination in the name of Islam generated derision, dismay, and dissension, most noticeably in the eastern wing.

The votaries of the Pakistani state's centralizing and homogenizing project arrogantly dismissed dissenting reactions as products of ignorance, insularity, and, worse still, secessionist inclinations. General Ayub had a visceral dislike for the advocates of provincial rights, who he thought were disrupting the economic progress of the country. The Pakistan Council for National Integration was established with the explicit objective of promoting better understanding among the people of the two wings in order to fashion a common national outlook. Reading rooms were opened in key cities, and lectures, seminars, and symposia were held on the theme of national unity and integration. Some of these did help lift the veil of ignorance between the two halves of the country. But without qualitative changes on the political and economic front, integrative rhetoric without concrete action was wholly ineffective in bridging the gulf separating the Bengalis from the people of West Pakistan.

Ayub had banked on the leavening effects of his economic development policies to justify keeping tight curbs on political activity. This was excessively optimistic, as he soon found out. Under his regime's externally stimulated development policies, East Pakistan received a bigger share of state resources than in the 1950s. But with 55 percent of the population, a share of 35 percent of the total development expenditure was neither fair nor equitable. The centralized nature of the state-directed development effort, in any case, ensured that the economy of the eastern wing continued to lag well behind that of the western wing. The regime's growth-oriented strategies increased regional income disparities without any improvement in Bengali representation among army officers, which remained at a lowly 5 percent. The higher income levels in West Pakistan were ascribed by officialdom to the effects of the "Green Revolution" and the leap in agricultural production that had ensued after the introduction of new technologies. In fact, interregional discrepancies in growth and development were a direct result of the policy to use East Pakistan's export surplus to finance West Pakistan deficits. The federal government's hollow propaganda incensed Bengali popular opinion further, galvanizing support for the Awami League but, at the same time, threatening to subsume its campaign for provincial autonomy with cries for full independence.

Losing East Pakistan

East Pakistan's possible secession had always troubled Pakistan's first military ruler. Ayub Khan's worst fears came true when the radical Bengali leader Maulana Bhashani, after sitting out the 1970 elections, upped the ante by calling for an independent and sovereign state of East Bengal as envisaged in the Muslim League's Lahore resolution of March 1940. The general pondered whether he was "witnessing the beginning of the end." This was what "most Bengali nationalists always meant when they talked of complete provincial autonomy." The fiery left-leaning maulana may have been venting his fury against West Pakistani callousness toward the recent cyclone victims and, by the same token, cashing in on an opportunity to take some of the shine off the Awami League. Even before the results of the 1970 elections were out, Ayub suspected that Bhashani's firecracker would spur Mujib into lighting the bonfire of Pakistani unity. The sheikh seemed to have been "waiting for such an opportunity"—"making independence a common cry of Bengal and turning it into an irresistible movement." Several of Ayub's visitors, including former as well as serving members of the federal cabinet, agreed with him that it was now only a matter of time before the eastern wing separated from the rest of Pakistan. With the Awami League's landslide victory, Mujib was "no longer a free agent" but "a prisoner of his vast support." Bhutto, too, would be loath to make any compromise that could allow his opponents to accuse him of "selling West Pakistan down the drain."¹³

As the architect of a political system that was threatening to fall apart, Ayub's forebodings offer a poignant insight into his reading of history. On January 4, 1971, he recorded the "strange irony of fate" that had seen Pakistan "escap[ing] the tyranny of an inflexible and hostile Hindu majority," only to end up facing an untenable situation where one wing was about to establish its permanent majority "without bearing a proportionately higher burden or higher liability." The alternative to this "artificial alliance" was independence or a loose confederation. Ayub thought that Bhashani's call for independence, if premature, was more representative of the "inner feelings of his people." The president was unimpressed by the fact that Mujib was not asking for independence but wanted complete autonomy for the eastern wing within a federal arrangement. From Ayub's angle of vision, Mujib was stalling for time in a calculated attempt to "milk

Punjab and Sindh” of their surpluses before opting out. Although in the 1970 elections, Punjab and Sindh “sold themselves to Bhutto and have no voice of their own left,” Ayub wondered whether “they would not rebel against such an idea.” He surmised that “the demand for separation may well start in these provinces once the reality dawns, as it is bound to in course of time, that they are being robbed.”¹⁴

Ayub had put his finger on the crux of the 1971 crisis. Who was liable to secede from whom, the majority in the eastern wing or sections of the minority in the west? If Pakistan was to remain united, by what democratic or federal principle could anyone prevent the majority population in the eastern wing from redressing past injustices by diverting resources from the western wing to develop its own economy? Mujib interpreted the Awami League’s absolute majority as a validation of his six-point program for provincial autonomy. But the program had not formed part of the electoral debate in West Pakistan, where the Awami League did not win a single seat. Bhutto had taken the PPP into the 1970 elections on a socialist platform. The PPP leader told the commission investigating the causes of Pakistan’s military defeat in 1971 that he had refrained from attacking the Awami League’s program at public meetings because they were venues for emotional outbursts, not reasoned arguments about the political and constitutional niceties of the six points. Bhutto had criticized the Awami League’s provincial autonomy demands at smaller gatherings of lawyers and intellectuals in West Pakistan, arguing that they were not in the best interests of the country and could lead to secession.

In the run-up to the 1970 elections, right-wing parties opposed to the PPP in the western wing were more vocal in criticizing the Awami League’s six points, which they often equated with the breakup of the country. After the elections, the PPP reaffirmed its commitment to a constitutional settlement within the framework of Pakistan. Because Pakistan was a federal and not a unitary state, Bhutto argued, it was vital to secure the consensus of the federating units. He never explained how a consensus was to be obtained after the elections. Though it emerged as the majority party in West Pakistan, the PPP’s support base was confined to Punjab and Sindh. In the NWFP and Balochistan, the Deobandi-oriented Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) fared better at the polls. Along with the defeated parties and politicians of West Pakistan, the JUI led by Maulana

Mufti Mahmud could not be shut out of discussions on the future constitutional arrangements.

This made Bhutto's claim to speak on behalf of West Pakistan indefensible and hints at the essence of his dilemma. On the threshold of a historic opportunity, the PPP chairman found himself between a rock and a hard place. The PPP had done well but not well enough. Although the party's radical program accounted for its electoral success in central Punjab, where the "Green Revolution" coupled with the Ayub regime's irrigation projects had made the most impact, Bhutto's controversial decision to enlist the support of conservative landlords in south Punjab and Sindh had played an equally important part in the PPP's victory. Tensions within the left and the right wings of the PPP threatened to split the party even before Bhutto had succeeded in registering his claim to power. To make matters worse, in cutting a deal with Mujib, Bhutto ran the risk of being denounced as a traitor in West Pakistan. Wary of becoming the butt of West Pakistani criticism if he compromised with Mujib, Bhutto miscalculated his ability to withstand the ill effects of becoming a willing pawn in the regime's game plan to thwart the Awami League's bid for power. If he wanted to avoid being called a traitor to West Pakistan at all costs, Bhutto was equally determined not to be cast in the role of arch-conspirator in the breakup of Pakistan. Bhutto's role in the post-1970 election crisis has to be assessed in the light of the positions taken by Mujib and Yahya Khan, not to mention the structural obstacles in the way of a smooth transfer of power from military to civilian rule in Pakistan.

The basic democracies system had been designed to safeguard the center from challenges mounted by political parties with broad-based support at the provincial level. Instead, opposition to Ayub's exclusionary political system crystallized in East Pakistan in the form of the six points, which, for all practical purposes, made the center redundant. Most political parties in the western wing wanted an effective, if not a strong, center that could lend credence to the existence of Pakistan as a sovereign independent state. There was scope for discussions between the representatives of the two wings, leading to a narrowing of differences on the question of center-province relations. But the localization of political horizons under the basic democracies system had prevented the forging of meaningful alliances between political parties both within and between the two wings.

This in large part explains why the six points elicited such different responses in East and West Pakistan.

The main bone of contention between the two wings was the powers of the federal center. The Awami League's vision of a limited center was a red flag for the gendarmes of the Pakistani state. The first of the six points called for the creation of a federation of Pakistan in the true spirit of the Lahore resolution with a parliamentary form of government based on the supremacy of a legislature directly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. The second point confined the powers of the federal government to defense and foreign affairs and vested all the residual subjects in the constituent units. According to the third point, there were to be two separate but freely convertible currencies for the two wings and, if that proved unworkable, a single currency for the whole country with constitutional safeguards to prevent the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan. Moreover, the eastern wing was to have its own reserve bank and a separate fiscal and monetary policy. The fourth point stripped the federal center of its powers of taxation and revenue collection and handed them to the federating units. Turning the twenty-four-year logic of military fiscalism in Pakistan on its head, the fourth point made the federal center dependent on handouts from state taxes to meet its expenditures. If this did not raise the hackles of the military brass, the fifth point certainly did. It envisaged separate accounts for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings, with the federal center getting an agreed percentage of their financial resources. Indigenous products were to move free of duty between the two wings. But this gesture to federalism was offset by the provision empowering the constituent units to establish trade links with foreign countries. The sixth point's demand for a separate militia or paramilitary force in East Pakistan was anodyne by comparison to the drastic readjustment that was being proposed in the apportioning of finances between the federal center and the federating units.

Yet for all the clouds darkening the political horizon, there was also an element of creative ambiguity in the postelectoral context. It was evident that Mujib's six points were negotiable, and he was not thinking of secession. His conception of a free Bengali nation was not incompatible with something less than a fully separate and sovereign state. If the military junta had seized this opening to negotiate the terms for a transfer of power with the newly elected representatives of the people, the course of

Pakistani history might have been different. Stung by election results that were completely contrary to the intelligence reports, Yahya delayed announcing a date for the meeting of the national assembly, which was to function as both the legislature and the constitution-making body. This aroused Bengali suspicions, prompting Mujib to take a more rigid stance on the six points. On January 3, 1971, at a mass meeting of a million people at the Dhaka Race Course ground, all the Awami League members of the national and provincial assemblies took an oath of allegiance to the six points. Most telling was Mujib's assertion that the six points were "the property of the people of Bangladesh" and there could be no question of a compromise on them.

Yet when he met Yahya Khan in the second week of January 1971, Mujib was a paragon of moderation. As the general had not bothered studying the six points, Mujib explained them to him and asked whether he had any objections. Yahya said he had none but noted that the Awami League would have to carry the West Pakistani political parties, the PPP in particular. Mujib urged him to convene the national assembly by February 15 and predicted that he would "obtain not only a simple majority but almost 2/3 majority." Admiral Ahsan, who was then still governor of East Pakistan, noted that with its absolute majority, the Awami League could "bulldoze their constitution through without bothering about West Pakistan's interests." Mujib was quick to the defense: "No, I am a democrat and the majority leader of all Pakistan. I cannot ignore the interests of West Pakistan. I am not only responsible to the people of East and West Pakistan but also to world opinion. I shall do everything on democratic principles." Mujib wanted to invite Yahya to Dhaka three or four days before the assembly session to see the draft constitution. "If you find objections," Mujib told Yahya, "I will try to accommodate your wishes." Toward that end he promised to seek the cooperation of the PPP as well as other parties in West Pakistan. The Awami League realized that the western wing did not need the same measure of autonomy as East Pakistan. In a telling statement of the inner thinking of the Awami League leadership, Mujib said that although he was prepared to be of help, he did not wish to interfere in any arrangements that the West Pakistani leadership may wish to make. Looking forward, Mujib talked about drafting Yahya's address to the national assembly, which he wanted convened no later than February 15, and went so far as to say that the Awami League intended to elect the general

as its presidential candidate. Mujib spoke of “a democratic parliament” and discussions on issues to “find acceptable formulas inside and outside the Assembly.” The meeting ended with Yahya flattering Mujib by calling him the next prime minister of Pakistan.¹⁵

An uncompromising public posture contrasted with private reassurances exchanged by the main actors and complicates the story of the tripartite negotiations that preceded the military action in East Pakistan. As far as Mujib was concerned, a formula could be worked out to save the unity of Pakistan even while pursuing legitimate Bengali demands. Soon after the elections, Mujib is said to have conveyed to Bhutto through a personal emissary that he could have the “big job” in return for accepting the six points and joining hands with the Awami League to force the military back into the barracks. Taken aback but excited by the idea, Bhutto declared that he was personally not opposed to the six points but had to carry the party with him.¹⁶ Secure in the knowledge of his powers under the LFO, Yahya Khan exploited Bhutto’s uncertainty about the PPP’s reactions to striking a deal with the Awami League. On his return to West Pakistan, Yahya stopped off in Larkana to visit Bhutto at his ancestral home. There is no record of what transpired at the meeting, but the president would almost certainly have mentioned his conversation with Mujib, though he did not tell Bhutto about the Awami League leader’s readiness to discuss the outstanding constitutional issues both inside and outside the national assembly.¹⁷ Yahya might also have hinted at the limits to which the regime was prepared to go to accommodate the Awami League’s demands. Any reference to the LFO and Pakistan’s national interest would have alerted Bhutto to the military establishment’s distaste for the six points.

The junta downplayed the meeting between Yahya and Bhutto, describing it as coincidental. There were several subsequent consultations between the two men that were far from incidental. The existence of a secret channel of communication between the PPP chairman and the martial law administrator pointed to collusion, generating a rash of negative speculation in the eastern wing. Bhutto was already held in high suspicion when he arrived in Dhaka on January 27 for the first round of talks with the Awami League leader. Bengali doubts about Bhutto’s intentions were strengthened when, after eight hours of being holed up alone in a room with Mujib, the PPP leader did not go beyond seeking clarifications on the

six points. There was no mention of joining hands to oust the military regime. Mujib was understandably “disappointed” and “puzzled” by these tactics.¹⁸

Upon returning from East Pakistan, Bhutto denied any differences with Mujib and said that their talks had been “exploratory” in nature. Before these statements could have a salutary effect, two Kashmiris hijacked an Air India Fokker on January 25, 1971, and forced it to land in Lahore. While Mujib condemned the hijacking on principle, Bhutto rushed to Lahore airport to greet the “freedom fighters” who were granted asylum by Pakistan. That the regime and the PPP chairman had been ensnared soon became apparent when the hijackers blew up the plane two days later and New Delhi reacted by banning all Pakistani interwing flights from using Indian airspace. This increased the distance between East and West Pakistan from 1,000 to 3,000 miles around the coast via Sri Lanka. The hijacking widened the gulf between Bhutto and Mujib and brought Indo-Pakistan relations to an all-time low, especially once the tribunal set up to investigate the incident concluded that the hijackers were not heroes but Indian agents. Mujib’s stance on the hijacking intensified Punjabi hostility toward him, making it more difficult for Bhutto to compromise. On February 21 a PPP convention vowed to abide by the chairman’s decision not to attend the session of the national assembly scheduled for March 3.

Yahya Khan used the excuse of a deteriorating political situation and the Indian threat looming on the borders to dismiss his civilian cabinet and invest the governors with martial law powers, a first step to clearing any hurdles in the way of a military action. The decision indicated the president’s semi-isolation and made him more dependent on the military hawks in the National Security Council (NSC). On the evening of February 22, he presided over a conference in Rawalpindi attended by the governors, martial law administrators, and intelligence officials, where a decision was taken in principle to deploy force in East Pakistan. An operational plan was discussed that envisaged the deployment of troops and the mass arrest of Awami League leaders on charges of sedition.¹⁹ The governor of East Pakistan, Admiral Ahsan, was the only one to raise his voice in objection. Along with General Sahibzada Yaqub Ali Khan, the commander of the eastern forces, the governor insisted on the imperative of finding a political solution and openly expressed dismay at the unthinking jingoism of West Pakistani officials who “regarded the people of East Pakistan

as a vast colonial population waiting to be proselytized.”²⁰ Until the third week of February, Yahya had appeared to endorse his views, but now the tide had turned. On arriving in the capital from Dhaka, Ahsan was “alarmed to notice a high tide of militarism flowing turbulently.” There was “open talk” at the conference of a “military solution according to plan.”²¹ Ahsan’s refusal to endorse such a course of action made him unpopular with his colleagues, who thought he had sold out to the Bengalis.

There is no indication that Bhutto was privy to the regime’s plans to clamp down on the Awami League leaders. Publicly, he persisted in calling for a political solution acceptable to both wings. Signs of the military leaning on Bhutto, albeit for its own institutional reasons, created the impression of complicity. The election results had blown Yahya’s cover under the LFO. A counterfoil was needed to stop Mujib’s thunderous march to power. In his narrative of the events, Brigadier A. R. Siddiqi, the head of the military’s Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) wing, maintains that after the elections, General Gul Hassan, the chief of the general staff, told him, “Let’s back Bhutto.”²² In his memoir, Gul Hassan holds both Bhutto and Mujib in contempt and refers to them as “creative liars” whose ambition and vindictiveness made them prone to fabrications if that served their political purpose.²³ What is undeniable is that the army had a clear self-interest in the outcome of the postelectoral negotiations. According to Siddiqi, the “right of a provincial-cum-regional party to frame the national Constitution and run the national government for the next five years, was not acceptable” to the military high command. Bhutto was preferred not because he was more worthy of trust than Mujib. The generals knew that the Awami League leader was no friend of theirs and feared he might try to seek a drastic cut in the army’s size and power. Circumstantially, Bhutto had better credentials. The PPP’s biggest majority was in Punjab, home to 75 percent of the army’s rank and file. This would force Bhutto to be “more reasonable and not touch the army.”²⁴

Encouraged by the regular exchange of missives with Yahya Khan and his contact with other top generals in the regime, Bhutto became more insistent on not attending the national assembly. While denying any fundamental opposition to the six points, he charged the Awami League with wanting to impose its preferred constitution on West Pakistan. Letting the majority frame a constitution of its choosing would make sense if Pakistan was a unitary state. In a country split into two parts that lacked any

semblance of political cohesion, the federal constitution had to be based on the consensus of all the federating units. In the interest of national unity, Bhutto agreed to the six points barring the second and the fifth relating to currency, taxation, international trade, and foreign assistance. When push came to shove, he was prepared to accept all the points except the one pertaining to foreign trade and aid. If these were adjusted in favor of the center, the PPP was prepared to cooperate with the Awami League in formulating the constitution.

The more ruthless of Bhutto's critics have persisted in accusing him of stalling for time at Yahya's behest. There is no question that Bhutto overestimated his ability to get the better of the general. Spurning Mujib's offer to help eject the military from the political arena was an error for which history cannot absolve Bhutto. Like any politician, Bhutto needed the support of his party leadership. Notwithstanding the PPP's studied public silence on the Awami League's demands, Bhutto remained remarkably consistent in his stance on the six points. Raising the PPP's objections to the conception of the federation in the six points, he noted that there was no federation in the world without a second house of parliament, a proposition Mujib had rejected. Equally objectionable was the fact that although some of the points upheld the principles of federalism, others implied a confederal arrangement between the two wings. The Awami League wanted West Pakistan to assume responsibility for the bulk of the external debt of the federal government. East Pakistan was to contribute only 24 percent of the center's running costs, and even this sum was to be set against "reparations" due from West Pakistan for its past exploitation of the eastern wing. On this basis, the entire central levy would have to be borne by the western wing for several years to come.²⁵

For a West Pakistani politician, let alone a Sindhi, to agree to such an arrangement was political suicide. Right-wing parties considered the six points blasphemous and would invariably denounce Bhutto for being opportunistic and, worse still, a traitor. His own ideologically divided party cadres were liable to revolt, certainly in Punjab, where the PPP had received strong electoral support in military cantonments. Leery of the Awami League's absolute majority, Bhutto stuck to his guns about discussing the main points of difference before the meeting of the national assembly. If Mujib had wanted Yahya to call the national assembly by mid-February, Bhutto wanted the meeting postponed until the end of March

so that the two parties could thrash out all the contentious issues. Ignoring Bhutto's arguments but also falling short of accepting Mujib's, Yahya had announced on February 13 that the national assembly would meet on March 3, 1971. Bhutto said his party would not attend unless assurances were given that it would be heard. The PPP was not boycotting the assembly but asking the Awami League to reciprocate its gesture of accepting four out of the six points. Likening the constitution to an essay, Bhutto said "we accept the essay written in East Pakistan—but we want to write some concluding paragraphs which are of vital national importance." "We have gone a mile to accommodate the Six Points," he continued, and "request our East Pakistani friends to move at least an inch to accommodate our views."²⁶ In a deliberate act of omission, Yahya Khan did not tell Bhutto about Mujib's readiness to engage in discussions outside the assembly. This implies that far from colluding with Bhutto, or for that matter with Mujib, as the PPP claimed, Yahya was looking to extend his regime's continuation in office by pitting the two main parties against each other.

The tactic worked. Sensing the army's reluctance to transfer power, Bhutto went on a verbal rampage through the populist alleyways of the historic city of Lahore. In a stormy speech to a mammoth crowd at Lahore's Mochi Gate on February 28, he reiterated his line that Mujib had decided on the constitution and wanted the PPP to rubber-stamp the document. Bhutto demanded a postponement of the national assembly or an extension of the 120-day period for the formulation of the constitution. Getting carried away by the force of his own words, he threatened to break the legs of anyone, whether from the PPP or any other West Pakistani party, who attended the national assembly session in Dhaka. This was provocative in the extreme. The die had been cast; the Awami League leadership's distrust of Bhutto was complete. Egged on by the intelligence agencies, most political parties in West Pakistan refused to attend the assembly session. On March 1 Yahya used the excuse to postpone the national assembly and aggravated matters by not announcing an alternative date for its meeting. While this sparked disappointment in West Pakistani political circles, the eastern wing exploded in violent frenzy. In clear evidence of serious differences in higher military circles, both Admiral Ahsan and General Yaqub resigned from their positions. With the removal of the two senior most West Pakistani officials who still believed in the need

for a political solution, the military gunned down several demonstrators in East Pakistan on March 2 and 3 before returning to the barracks.

From March 1 until the fateful moment on March 25, 1971, when a crackle of gunfire disrupted the silence of the night in Dhaka, Bengali antipathy for the Pakistani military presence in East Pakistan soared. Food sellers refused to supply meat and fresh produce to the army while West Pakistanis and pro-government Urdu-speaking Biharis were targeted by the Awami League muscle men. Despite clear and present provocation, the army desisted from taking any action, purportedly to allow the political negotiations to succeed. Yet since a decision to resort to military action had been taken in principle, the lack of any remedial measure on the part of the military can equally well be seen as marking time to fly in troop reinforcements from West Pakistan. The state's inaction after a vicious display of its coercive power emboldened Awami League workers to begin taking over state institutions. After March 2, Mujib, popularly known as Bangabandhu (friend of Bengal) was running the civilian administration in East Pakistan from his unassuming two-storied home at 32 Dhanmandi. The three-member Hamoodur Rahman Commission set up to investigate the causes of the military defeat in East Pakistan chastised the military regime for letting the situation get out of hand, with the result that much greater use of force was needed later to regain control. There was no reason why keeping the door open for negotiations with Mujib was inconsistent with maintaining law and order. As far as the commission could discern, the majority of the people of East Pakistan were not in favor of secession. But with the government doing nothing to stop the violence, it was difficult to prevent people from thinking that it was "making ready to pack up and go." Even those who may have wished to oppose the Awami League were deflected from doing so.²⁷

By the time Yahya came around to announcing that the national assembly would meet on March 25, Mujib's stance had stiffened. Mindful of the extreme views in the Awami League cadres, who considered the six-points nonnegotiable, he now demanded the immediate withdrawal of martial law and a return of all military personnel to the barracks, an inquiry into the loss of life, and an immediate transfer of power to the representatives of the people. Reluctant to transfer power, Yahya could not agree to these demands prior to the completion of the constitution-making process. But he was prepared to ask the army to hold their fire

until he had gone through the motions of trying to make Mujib see sense. Banking on the inability of the two main political parties to agree, Yahya Khan had eased into a life of excess in wine, women, and song. Yet the Hamoodur Rahman Commission did not attribute the general's "dereliction of duty" to his heavy drinking. The supreme commander of the armed forces held his drink, though his mental reflexes had evidently slowed down. The information garnered by the commission indicated that Yahya Khan, flanked by a close circle of military officials, "played out a game in which no clear cut decision could be reached."²⁸

Such a game was played out in the vitiated atmosphere of the negotiations. Yahya had set the tone on March 6 while announcing a new date for the national assembly. Slamming the Awami League for misunderstanding his reasons for postponing the meeting of the national assembly, he had said: "I will not allow a handful of people to destroy the homeland of millions of innocent Pakistanis." It was "the duty of the Pakistan Armed Forces to ensure the integrity, solidarity and security of Pakistan," and it was "a duty in which they have never failed."²⁹ With Bhutto demanding time out at the decisive moment in the match, and the junta cloaking the threat of force in the flighty language of national unity, the Bangabandhu had few options. Mujib was now even more of a captive of his Awami League supporters who, realizing that the regime had no real intention of either sharing or transferring power, wanted Bengalis to fight and take what was theirs by right.

On March 7, 1971, Mujib addressed a massive political rally at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka. A skilled public orator in Bengali, the Bangabandhu delivered a stirring speech that reflected the mood of his people. He called for every Bengali home to be turned into a fortress. As blood had already been shed, he was prepared to offer more blood to free the people of his country. "The struggle this time is a struggle for freedom. The struggle this time is a struggle for independence," he proclaimed passionately, before concluding with the slogan "Jai Bangla" (Victory to Bengal). A virtual declaration of independence, Mujib's March 7 speech did not, however, completely shut the door on further talks.

The negotiations that got under way in Dhaka in mid-March 1971 were peculiar in many respects. The presidential team closely choreographed the meetings. No minutes were kept, making it impossible to cross-check and verify either Yahya's or Bhutto's testimony to the Hamoodur Rahman

Commission. Mujib did not appear before the commission. He was assassinated in 1975, and the report was not declassified until 2001. Whatever the limitations of the inquiry commission's findings, they do make it possible to piece together a proximate account of what transpired at the negotiations. At his first meeting with Yahya, Mujib demanded the immediate lifting of martial law and convening of the national assembly. There was to be a simultaneous transfer of power at the center and the provinces. Yahya accepted all the demands except the lifting of martial law on the rather lame excuse that this would create a legal lacuna. By the time the two men met again on March 20, their aides had worked out the modalities for ending martial law. Power was to be transferred to all five provinces but not for the time being at the center, where Yahya was to remain in office. The national assembly was to be divided into two committees, one for each wing. These committees were to meet together to frame a constitution on the basis of their respective reports.

This was a circuitous way to keep a divided country united. But, then, Pakistan was no ordinary country. Considering the Lahore resolution of 1940, the idea of a confederation was not nearly so far-fetched. On arriving in Dhaka on March 21, 1971, Bhutto rejected the proposal to divide the assembly into two parts on the grounds that it pointed to a confederation and paved the way for secession. This was in line with Yahya's own thinking. That night Bhutto consulted other PPP leaders, who concurred with the assessment. The next morning when the three protagonists met together for the first and only time, Yahya said that the PPP's agreement was required for the Awami League's proposals. Mujib bluntly told Yahya that it was up to him to persuade Bhutto. The discussions ended with the two politicians saying nothing to each other in the president's presence. Outside the presidential salon, Mujib took Bhutto aside and asked for his help to overcome an increasingly grave situation. Afraid that the conversation might be tapped, the two walked out into the verandah and sat in the portico, where Yahya saw them, "honeymooning with each other," as he snidely commented later.³⁰ Mujib told Bhutto to become the prime minister of West Pakistan and leave the eastern wing to the Awami League, warning him not to trust the military, as it would destroy both of them. Bhutto replied that he would "rather be destroyed by the military than by history." While agreeing to consider the Awami League's proposals, the PPP leader urged Mujib to place them before the national assem-

bly, as he was not prepared to give a personal pledge on such a serious matter. According to Bhutto, Mujib rejected the idea of the national assembly being convened even briefly.³¹

The only direct exchange between Mujib and Bhutto in the tripartite talks ended in a stalemate, though the two had planned on meeting again in secret. For a second time within a matter of months, Mujibur Rahman had solicited Bhutto's help in dislodging the military regime. That the effort failed is not surprising once the haze is lifted from the moves and countermoves in the final days of a united Pakistan. Recourse to thick narrative detail reveals that the principal hurdle in the way of a united Pakistan was not disagreement on constitutional matters but the transfer of power from military to civilian hands. More concerned with perpetuating himself in office, Yahya Khan was strikingly nonchalant about the six points. He left that to the West Pakistani politicians, in particular Bhutto, who, contrary to the impression in some quarters, was more of a fall guy for the military junta than a partner in crime. In his testimony to the Hamoodur Rahman Commission, Yahya blamed Bhutto for the failure of the negotiations to make headway. What he did not reveal was that the policy of divide and rule had survived colonialism and become the preferred policy instrument of the postcolonial state in handling an intractable and increasingly violent polity. It was a recipe for disaster at the service of a drunken and dissolute ruler, more capable of dividing than ruling according to any known norms of governance.

Given the historical evidence, the verdict on apportioning responsibility for the 1971 debacle in East Pakistan must go decisively against Yahya Khan and his senior military associates in the NSC.³² What clinched the issue for the military high command was the law-and-order situation in East Pakistan, where the Awami League was running a parallel government with bruising effect on the morale of the armed forces. Irritated by the daily abuse levied at the military presence by the Bengali press, they were incensed to find that India was actively supporting the dissidents. What the military's eastern command did not gauge, thanks to a linguistically impaired intelligence network, was that its own Bengali troops strongly supported the Awami League "miscreants." Although the decision to use military force in East Pakistan was taken only on February 22, plans had been put in place much earlier. As early as December 1970, East Pakistan's martial law administrator, General Yaqub Khan, had worked

out the operational aspects of imposing law and order in what was code-named “Operation Blitz.” Yaqub subsequently resigned, warning against taking military action in a situation that required a political resolution. The alarm bells went off on March 23 when the Awami League marked Pakistan Day by hoisting Bangladeshi flags but fell short of declaring independence. There were reports of Jinnah’s portraits being defaced. More seriously from a military point of view, fighting broke out in Chittagong that day, with the East Pakistan Rifles and East Bengal Regiment joining hands with the dissidents against the West Pakistani forces, completely paralyzing the port city. Faced with supply difficulties, the eastern command under General Tikka Khan was implementing the first stages of its “Operation Searchlight” plan, while Yahya Khan and his aides continued their talks with Mujib and Bhutto.

It is commonly held that military action followed the breakdown of negotiations. But the talks never actually broke down; they were unilaterally abandoned on the orders of the president acting in unison with his inner military circle in Rawalpindi. A transfer of power acceptable to Mujib and Bhutto was still not outside the realm of possibility. The PPP leaders saw the Awami League’s revised proposals on March 25. These called for a “confederation of Pakistan” and two constitutional conventions, instead of the separate committees in the earlier version, which were to frame the constitutions for each wing. The conventions would then meet to frame a constitution for the confederation. In shifting from a vaguely federal to a clearly confederal arrangement, the Awami League addressed the PPP’s main objection that the six points said contradictory things about the future constitutional structure. Separate constitutions for the two wings, followed by one for the confederation of Pakistan, accommodated the PPP leader’s fears of being diddled out of power by the Awami League. On March 14, he had made a similar demand at a public rally in Karachi’s Nishtar Park. Remembered in Pakistan as his *udhar tum, idhar hum* (you there, us here) speech, Bhutto had maintained that power ought to be transferred to the Awami League in the east and the PPP in the west. He was widely condemned in West Pakistan for sanctioning the division of the country. Dismissing accusations of colluding with Yahya Khan and being responsible for the political gridlock, Bhutto spoke of “one Pakistan.” The “rule of the majority” for the whole country could become applicable only if the six-point demand with its secessionist overtones was

dropped. As that was not being done, the rationale and logic of the six-point demand necessitated agreement of the majority parties of both the wings.³³

Bhutto's two-majority thesis was conceded in the final version of the Awami League's constitutional proposals. However, the notion of a confederation was wholly alien to the thinking of the military command in Pakistan. Having run Pakistan as a quasi-unitary state despite its federal configuration, the guardians of military privilege were not about to concede ground to those they saw as traitors. Instead of trying to bring the situation under control by disarming the East Pakistan Rifles and the East Bengal Regiment, the army gave vent to its rage by unleashing a reign of terror. Dhaka University was stormed and many students, faculty, and staff killed. There was indiscriminate killing of civilians, with Hindus and intellectuals serving as the main targets. The sheer ferocity of the military action ensured that Dhaka was quickly subdued, but fighting continued to rage in Chittagong and other key cities while the countryside remained in ferment. In a glaring instance of strategic oversight, Yahya and his aides moved to pummel the Awami League without fully considering India's or, for that matter the world's, likely reaction. The Pakistani Foreign Office should have had no difficulty anticipating India's likely response. But the merrymaking general and his inner coterie of military generals in their ineptitude cut themselves off from the thinking of the Foreign Office. They also had made no clear plans on how to deal with East Pakistan after the objectives of the crackdown were achieved. Yahya Khan left for West Pakistan a few hours before the start of the military operation. From his room in the Intercontinental Hotel, Bhutto watched the army setting ablaze the horizon with breathtaking ruthlessness. Punitive action without any thought to reopening the political dialogue made no sense. Yet at no time after the first shots were fired in the barricaded streets of Dhaka on March 25, 1971, did Yahya Khan restart negotiations with the Awami League. While most of the top Bengali leadership fled across the border to West Bengal, Mujib was promptly arrested and transported to a West Pakistani jail. Apart from a facetious trial in which he was given a death sentence, the regime made no effort to initiate dialogue with the Awami League leader.

With the international media flush with harrowing tales of the army's atrocities and the plight of millions of refugees who had fled to India,

Pakistan's stocks slumped internationally. Archer Blood, the American consul general in Dhaka, thought it unconscionable for the United States to turn a blind eye to the reality of the oppression Bengalis were facing and to which the "overworked term genocide is applicable." The only likely outcome of the conflict was "a Bengali victory and the consequent establishment of an independent Bangladesh." It was "foolish" to give "one-sided support to the likely loser."³⁴ In contrast to 1965, China politely distanced itself from a regime charged with genocide. Washington was a bit more forthcoming because the Pakistani government had recently helped the secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to make contact with Beijing.³⁵ But American support was more symbolic than real—a morale-boosting assurance that India would not be permitted to rip through West Pakistan. It did not extend to absolving the Pakistani regime of its crimes and misdemeanors. The story of the junta's botched international diplomacy is a trifle less appalling than its abysmal failure on the military front. A brutal military crackdown in late March and April may have resulted in a semblance of order in key urban centers and around the cantonments. Once the monsoon set in, however, the army was constantly harried by the Bangladesh Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) resorting to guerrilla tactics in the watery terrain of the Bengal delta. In August 1971, India, which was actively training the Bangladesh liberation forces, buttressed its international position by entering into a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union. The Pakistani Army's strategic doctrine of defending East Pakistan from the western wing exploded in its face when India launched a full-scale attack on the eastern front. There were no effective lines of communication between key players in the regime and an internally divided GHQ,³⁶ far less between them and the eastern command. Pakistani troops did fight the advancing Indian troops effectively in key sectors. The United States sent its nuclear carrier USS *Enterprise* from the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal to hover on the edges of Indian territorial waters. But the surrender of 93,000 soldiers without a whimper on December 16, 1971, highlighted the magnitude of the defeat suffered by the Pakistani Army at the hands of its primary rival. General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, then in command of the eastern front, alleged that the "ignominy of surrender," which is "a death warrant for a soldier," was "imposed" on him and his men by "our selfish rulers and selfish officers sitting in GHQ" in order to save West Pakistan. "We ac-

cepted humiliation to save our homeland,” the disgraced general claimed in his memoir.³⁷

Strategic blundering and political ineptitude combined to create a horrific nightmare for a military high command that was ill equipped to handle the situation. Once orders had been given to put boots on the ground and enforce law and order, pent-up frustrations shredded the last remnants of humanity still adorning the hearts of the West Pakistani troops. The ethical dilemma of killing fellow Muslims was quickly overcome. Bengalis were not just black men; they were Muslims in name only and had to be purged of their infidelity. Whatever the reasoning of the perpetrators, nothing can justify the horrendous crimes committed in the name of a false sense of nationalism. As in any war, there was violence on both sides against unarmed men, women, and children. But there was a world of difference between organized state coercion against a largely unarmed populace and the targeted violence of armed dissidents against known collaborators of the military regime.

A blackout on national and international news from East Pakistan kept the majority of the people of West Pakistan in a state of blissful ignorance. Some accounts of the massacre of civilians and rape of women in East Pakistan by the national army and its hastily raised Islamist militias known as *razakars* did filter through. Some West Pakistanis registered their protest. But few in the western wing were listening, convinced that the armed forces were performing their duty to protect the national integrity of the country against Indian machinations. This makes the words and actions of those brave souls from the western wing who did speak out that much more significant. Habib Jalib bewailed the savagery that had ravished East Pakistan. “For whom should I sing my songs of love,” he asked, when “the garden is a bloody mess,” when there were battered flower buds and blood drenched leaves everywhere despite an unstoppable rain of tears.³⁸ Jalib had sensed that nothing could wash away the sins of the cabal of generals who had presided over the most inglorious moment in the history of Pakistan. The noted Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz also wrote poems in 1971 lamenting that events in East Pakistan had shaken his faith in humanity. Three years later when he visited Dhaka, Faiz felt a strange kind of estrangement upon meeting with intimate Bengali friends. “After how many more meetings,” he wondered, “will we be that close once again?” How many monsoons would it take to usher in a

spring of unstained green in east Bengal? The end of love had been so cruel and pitiless that the crushed heart longed in vain just to quarrel once again with old friends. Faiz had gone to Bangladesh, ready to offer everything, even the gift of his own life. Such was the distance between him and his closest friends that these healing words remained unspoken after all else had been said.³⁹

More than four decades after the bloody separation, the gulf between the erstwhile wings of Pakistan has grown wider in the absence of any remedial measure. Unable to forget, the people of Bangladesh might at least try and forgive if presented with a formal apology by their former tormentors. Unwilling to learn the lessons of their own history, successive rulers of what remained of Pakistan in the west avoided owning up to the crimes committed by their defeated and disgraced predecessors. The tragedy of East Pakistan had been partially foretold by the willful manipulation of center–province relations in the 1950s and 1960s by a military-dominated state. Yet a fully separate and sovereign state was an option of the last resort in the spring of 1971 once the military junta shut down all prospects of realizing Bengali national aspirations within a federal or confederal framework. What came in the wake of 1971 promised to be an endless trial by fire for the constituent units of a Pakistani federation that the military in league with the central bureaucracy insisted on governing as a quasi-unitary state.