forum
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THE LAST CHANCE

The elections on 7 December and the response to it is likely to determine the future of Pakistan. This is no conventional election to decide who amongst the ruling coterie will enjoy the privilege of plundering the nation for another five years. It is a referendum to decide the terms under which the different regions and nationalities of Pakistan will live together as a single country.

It is no good saying that this was decided in 1947 and that we are held together by bonds of faith and ideology. These are escapist cliches which beg the fundamental question. For 23 years, in the name of ideology and integration a narrow clique of bureaucrats, businessmen and landlords, sustained by physical force chose to impose their will on the nation. History and circumstance identified this clique with West Pakistan, so that East Pakistan's alienation from power was total. The problem was not so much the conflict between a strong centre and weak province but between the hegemony of this narrow class over the centre and the use of the centre as an instrument for the domination and exploitation of East Pakistan. While Ayub represented this dispensation in al its nakedness the roots of this system go back much earlier to the time where parliamentary democracy was itself perverted as a camouflage for these interests.

It is however fatally erroneous to think that al we need is a return to the parliamentary system for justice to be done to East Pakistan and other alienated groups in the polity. Let East Pakistan rule the centre is the swan song used by opponents to divert the struggle away from the demand for regional autonomy.

Ideally parliament should provide such a prospect. With a 54% majority for East Pakistan the balance of power in a democratic system should always rest with the East. Those who make this offer are however the first to argue for a bicameral legislature where the upper house would seek to dilute the power of the majority region in the lower house.

But even if this move were frustrated, could East Pakistan hope to really dominate a strong central government? To believe this would be to take the naive view that in the years ahead all powers within the polity will reside within the federal parliament. Twenty-three years has taught us that parliament is but one of several bastions of power. The extra-parliamentary bastions -- land, money, bureaucracy, and the power which sustains them -- are very much in command of West Pakistan. Elections will reflect their influence on the parliament but they will constitute their own extra-constitutional upper house in the event of East Pakistan dominating the legislature.

This will mean that any attempts by East Pakistan to monopolise popular interests which conflict with those of this powerful force will face the danger of yet another aggression from extra-parliamentary influences. The people are now sufficiently conscious to meet such a challenge but the existence of such a threat will put a democratic centre under intolerable tensions and keep the country in an agony of uncertainty. Until East Pakistan has the physical countervailing power to neutralise this threat it is sheer fantasy to think it can dominate a strong centre.

But this does not rule out its more feasible demand for ruling East Pakistan. Here they seek merely to abridge the ruling clique's pastures of exploitation.

This will make two major advances towards securing peace and stability, in the realm. First it will take the issue of economic decision-making and the division of resources completely out of the hands of the centre. Never again will East Pakistan have to squabble with the West wing dominated ruling clique over shared resources. Another five years of such squabbling would in the historical context of 23 years bitterness have been fatal for the nation. With decisions vesting in the region and relating to the use of their own resources this will enable temperature to come down from the boiling point at which it rests today. After 5 years of disengagement, with accumulated reserves of goodwill it is not inconceivable that the regions will cede more powers to the centre out of mutual interest.

Secondly East Pakistan will be able to take its national revolution a stage further towards a genuine social revolution. A strong centre has meant that East Pakistan has had to carry the malign influence of the West wing ruling class which has served as a bulwark to all social change. With all powers vested in the region it merely has to contend with its own feeble ruling elite, who can only offer token resistance to the upsurge of a conscious people. Today social revolution has for East Pakistan become a necessity if the region is not to disintegrate into anarchy bred from its abject poverty and neglect. The million dead in the coastal areas perished not due to a faulty warning signal but because the nation has ignored warnings of such disaster for the past twenty three years.

On the 7th East Pakistan can therefore vote only for autonomy, for its survival depends upon it. Whilst the misleading slogans of ideology and strong centre have already been routed and their remnants swept away by the tidal bore, local influences may yet serve to frustrate the popular will for autonomy. Bengal ignored these influences in 1946 and 1954. It must ignore this even more firmly on the 7th and vote en masse for the 6 point/11-point programme which embodies autonomy for East Pakistan.

An unequivocal vote for autonomy will make it unmistakably clear to the ruling clique -- and by courtesy of the cyclone, the world -- that East Pakistan wants to rule itself. Any individual or group who thinks it can ignore this elemental force must act in the full knowledge that the survival of the country will be put at stake.


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It is this reality which must be brought home to our rulers and beyond them to the people of West Pakistan on 7th December. East Pakistan's struggle is not a racial crusade against the West wing. It is a struggle for realising the usurped rights of 70 million East Pakistan's within a constitutional framework. Its demand is based on the realities of power as they emerge out of West Pakistan's existing class structure. Had we thought that this social order in West Pakistan was permanent ours would have become a liberation struggle. It is because we have faith that the awakened people of West Pakistan will in the years ahead follow us in overthrowing the shackles of their ruling elite, tha we seek our destiny within the framework of one Pakistan. When the people of West Pakistan have liberated themselves and the people of West Pakistan can face can other on the floor of a people's parliament we have no doubt that a new relationship will evolve out of the ashes of the old social order.

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