

# The historic six-point movement and its impact on the struggle for independence

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**T**HE historic Six-Point Demand or the Six-Point Formula has been widely credited as the "charter of freedom" in Bangladesh's struggle for self-determination from Pakistan's domination. Indeed, the six-point movement in 1966 was the turning point in our quest for independence. On June 7 in 1966 the Awami League called a countrywide hartal in the then East Pakistan to press home the six-point demands. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with many others was arrested. Since then 7th June is observed as the historic six-point day.

Notwithstanding the deliberate distortions of our political history over a period of almost thirty years, the fact remains that the six-point movement is a milestone in the history of our struggle for independence.

The six-point plan had envisaged a federal form of government based on the 1940 Lahore Resolution, a parliamentary system of government directly elected by the people on the basis of adult franchise, two separate currencies or two reserve banks for the two wings of Pakistan, and a para-military force for East Pakistan.

The spectacular success of the six-point movement in 1966 had prompted the ruling coterie of Pakistan to discredit the organisers of this movement. Although Ayub Khan's diabolical regime had used various brutal and punitive measures against the proponents, organisers and supporters of the six-point formula, the six-point anchored mass upsurge in 1966 had seriously impacted and conditioned the subsequent political developments in Pakistan.

The main purpose of this paper is to assess the significance and relevance of the historic six-point movement and its impact on Bangladesh's struggle for independence. Once the main contents of six-point formula are summarised, the nature, magnitude, and impact of the six-point movement can be appraised.

## Reactions of the political leaders to the six-point plan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's response

The mainstream political leaders of the opposition parties in Pakistan were not even willing to

discuss the merits or demerits of the proposed six-point formula for ensuring greater provincial autonomy for the eastern province of Pakistan. In fact, no West Pakistani political leader (not even Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, the President of the then All-Pakistan Awami League) was willing to lend any support to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's clarion call for maximum provincial autonomy based on the proposed six-point formula.

It is also really appalling to recall that, even after the lapse of forty two years, the non-Awami League delegates from the then East Pakistan did not endorse the six-point demand in that historic conference in early February 1966. Like their West-Pakistani counterparts, East Pakistani political stalwarts had also smelled an element of "secession" or "disintegration" of Pakistan in the six-point formula. In fact, the six-point formula could not be pried out of the "subject-matter committee" of that so-called all-party conference.

Instead of endorsing or discussing the six-point formula, the self-declared champions of restoration of democracy in the then Pakistan had deliberately launched a vile propaganda campaign against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the chief sponsor and proponent of the six-point plan. Doubtless, the motivated propaganda was essentially characterised by blatant falsehoods, conjectures, distortions, and innuendoes. In fact, the six-point proposal received frontal attack even from the veteran Pakistani political stalwarts of most of the political parties at a time when they were clamouring for establishing pure democracy in Pakistan!

In her celebrated book, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (The University Press, 1994, pp. 139-140), Dr. Rounaq Jahan succinctly summarised the hostile reactions of other political parties to the six-point formula: "The six-point demand not only split the Awami League but also made it difficult for the East Pakistan wing to form an alliance with any other West Pakistan-based party. The CML (Council Muslim League) decried the six points as a demand for confederation, not federation; the Jama'at-Islami branded it as a separatist design; the Nizam-i-Islam rejected it as a unilateral, dictatorial move on Mujib's part; and the NAP (National Awami Party)

dismissed it on the grounds that it was parochial and did not include any measures to free East Pakistan from imperialists agents." Yet, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman refused to be blackmailed or intimidated by the criticism of his six-point plan.

In an impromptu press conference in Lahore on February 10, 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman argued, as noted by Talukder Maniruzzaman in a seminal essay in 1967: "The question of (provincial) autonomy appears to be more important after the war (between India and Pakistan in September, 1965). The time has come for making East Pakistan self-sufficient in all respects. He then enunciated a 'six-point charter of survival' program for East Pakistan (Talukder Maniruzzaman, *National Integration and Political Development in Pakistan*, Asian Survey, Vol. 7, No. 12, 1967, pp. 876-885)."

In that press conference, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had clearly said

publicly stated that he was willing to negotiate his six-point plan with anyone in good faith, provided a meaningful autonomy was ensured for East Pakistan. The autocratic rulers of Pakistan started using repressive tactics to suppress the six-point movement. As noted by Dr. Md. Abdul Wadud Bhuyain, "the Ayub regime's policy towards the six-point demand of the Awami League was one of total suppression. It showed once again that the regime failed to respond to the political demand (Md. Abdul Wadud Bhuyain, *Emergence of Bangladesh & Role of Awami League*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1982, p. 104)."

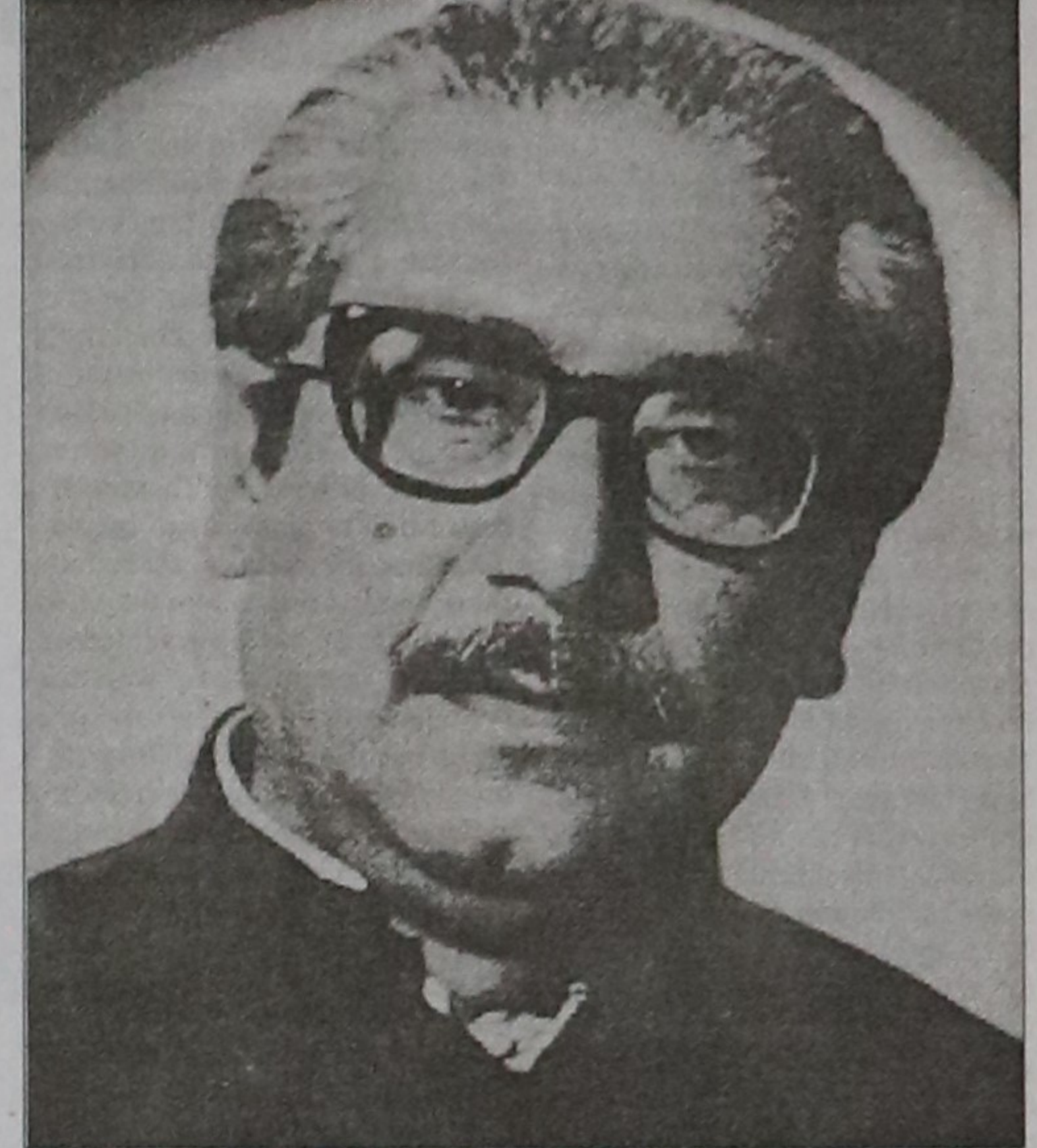
Immediately after the provincial autonomy plan based on the six-point formula was unveiled by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Lahore conference of opposition political parties in early February, 1966, Ayub Khan was quick to denounce it as a separatist or secessionist move. Aimed at browbeating the dedicated champions

of "maximum autonomy" but also launched a mass movement (which he himself led till he was put in jail on May 9, 1966) for mobilising mass support for the six-point program. He invested all of his energies and resources in disseminating the fundamental message, and articulating both the rationale and the justification of "maximum autonomy" for East Pakistan.

However, before launching a full-fledged mass movement for realising his six-points, Sheikh Mujib had initiated some strategic intra-party measures. For example, the working committee of the party was restructured and revamped in the historic Council Session of the East Pakistan Awami League (EPAL), that was held on March 18-20, 1966. While Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmed were unanimously elected the president and general secretary, respectively, of the newly revamped Awami League, the proposed six-point program was also fully endorsed

The only time wasted was in the process of posting bail for his release. Arrested again, and being released on bail once again, and then immediately move to another place to address the public meetings (Anisuzzaman, *Bangabandhu in the Context of History*, in Mretoonjoyee Mujib--Immortal Mujib, Dhaka: Bangabandhu Parishad, 1995, pp. 11-12). The Daily Ittefaq, the most popular Bangla newspaper of the then eastern province of Pakistan, was shut down, its press was confiscated, and its editor, Tofazzal Hossain (Manik Mia), was put in jail. Yet, the repressive police forces could not halt the march of the six-point movement.

In his seminal assessment of the role of the Awami League in the political development of Pakistan, Dr. M. Rashiduzzaman summarised the significance of the six-point program: "The culmination of the Awami League demand for regional autonomy came in March 1966 when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman put forward his



**Had there been no six-point movement in 1966, there is every doubt that the Agartala Conspiracy case would have been hatched against Sheikh Mujib at that particular time. Had there been no Agartala Conspiracy case, the student-mass movement of 1969 may not have taken place. Thus, the six-point movement, Agartala Conspiracy case, and the 1969 student-mass movement had provided the much-needed ground and context for the emergence of Sheikh Mujib as Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal). Subsequently, the people of the then eastern province of Pakistan had vested their full trust in their Bangabandhu in the general elections of 1970, that made this extraordinary man their legitimate sole spokesperson and undisputed leader.**

that since the proposed six-point demand was not at all designed to harm the common people of West Pakistan, the question of demanding a genuine "provincial autonomy" for East Pakistan based on the six-point formula "should not be misconstrued or dismissed as provincialism." He pointed out that the 17-day war between Pakistan and India in September 1965 had made it crystal clear to the "East Pakistanis" that the defense of East Pakistan couldn't be contingent upon the mercy or courtesy of West Pakistan. He said that instead of relying on West Pakistan for its protection, East Pakistan -- a land located one thousand miles away -- should be made self-sufficient for defending itself from external aggression. He also made it abundantly clear that his six-point plan for "maximum" provincial autonomy reflected the long-standing demands of the people of East Pakistan. He also pointed out the uselessness and irrelevance of the All-Party Conference.

On his return to Dhaka on February 11, 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman provided further clarification on his six-point formula in a press conference. He explained why he had disassociated himself from the All-Party conference in Lahore. He clearly stated that the delegates from East Pakistan Awami League (EPAL) had rejected not only the proposals passed by the All-Party Conference but also severed all ties with the leaders of the so-called conference of the opposition parties. He said that it was not at all possible for him or his party to 'betray the genuine interests' of the aggrieved and deprived people of East Pakistan.

He emphasised that the immediate adoption and implementation of his six-point formula "will be conducive to foster durable relationship between the two provinces of Pakistan." In a press conference on February 14, 1966, he also repeated what he had uttered in his Lahore press conference: that the "question of autonomy appears to be more important for East Pakistan after the 17-day war between Pakistan and India. The time is ripe for making East Pakistan self-sufficient in all respects."

## Reaction of the then dictatorial regime to the six-point plan

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's demand for "maximum autonomy" based on his six-point formula seems to have shaken the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The six-point plan had exposed the fact that the real intention of Pakistan's ruling elite was to "strengthen" the central government, but not Pakistan. He repeatedly said in several public meetings that the people of Pakistan had always desired to have a "strong Pakistan," not a "strong central government."

However, the ruling coterie of Pakistan was not at all interested in dealing or negotiating with the Awami League on the issue of provincial autonomy even though Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had

of greater provincial autonomy, Ayub Khan had started discrediting both the message and the messenger of the six-point program. Appearing in the final session of the Pakistan (Convention) Muslim League in Dacca on March 21, 1966, fully attired in the army general's khaki uniform with full display of all his regalia and medallions, the self-declared president of Pakistan had condemned the six-point plan in the harshest possible terms.

Characterising the six-point formula as a demand for "greater sovereign Bengal," he claimed that such a plan would put the "Bengali Muslims" under the domination of "caste Hindus" of West Bengal. He had compared the "prevailing situation" in Pakistan (as of March, 1966) with the volatile situation that had prevailed in the USA before the outbreak of a prolonged Civil War in the early 1860s. He said that the nation might have to face a "civil war" if such volatile situations were forced upon him by the "secessionists" and "destructionists."

He had even threatened the alleged "autonomists" and "secessionists" with "dire consequences" if they failed to shun the idea of provincial autonomy. Ayub Khan had also the audacity to threaten that the "language of weapons" would be ruthlessly employed for exterminating the "secessionist elements from Pakistan."

Monem Khan, the infamous governor of East Pakistan, had publicly stated that "as long as I remain as the governor of this province, I will see to it that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remains in chains." Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the flamboyant foreign minister of Pakistan, had openly challenged Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to a public debate at Paltan Maidan in Dhaka on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed six-point formula. To the chagrin of the Ayub regime, Tajuddin Ahmed, the then number 2 leader in Awami League, took up the challenge on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Unfortunately, it was Z.A. Bhutto who did not show up!

## Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launches the six-point movement

A fearless Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was quick to respond to such false accusations and vile threats. In a mammoth public gathering at Paltan Maidan, he thundered: "No amount of naked threats can distract the deprived Bengalees from their demand for provincial autonomy based on their six-point plan." Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the greatest champion of Bengalees' rights for self-determination, along with top leaders of the Awami League, kept on addressing numerous public meetings in the nooks and corners of the then East Pakistan. The entire Awami League and the East Pakistan Students' League (EPSL), its student front, were geared toward mobilising and motivating the general masses in favour of self-government and autonomy. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had not only presented the bold pro-

posal for "maximum autonomy"

by the council session. To the chagrin of Pakistan's ruling coterie, the six-point formula generated a great deal of enthusiasm among the people of the then East Pakistan. Indeed, the six-point movement had instantly garnered spontaneous mass support throughout East Pakistan.

The entire nation was galvanised throughout February-March-April-May-June, 1966. As noted by Dr. Talukder Maniruzzaman: "To say that this (six-point) program evoked tremendous enthusiasm among the people of East Bengal would be an understatement. Encouraged by overwhelming popular support, Sheikh Mujib convened a meeting of the AL Council (March 18-20, 1966) in which his program was unanimously approved and he was elected president of the (Awami League) party. With a phalanx of organisers from the Student's League, Sheikh Mujib then launched a vigorous campaign. For about three months (from mid-February to mid-May), the urban centers of East Bengal seemed to be in the grip of a 'mass revolution,' prompting the central government to arrest Sheikh Mujib and his chief lieutenants (Tajuddin Ahmed, Khandokar Mustaq Ahmed, Mansoor Ali, Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, and others) under the (infamous) Defense of Pakistan Rules, and put down a complete general strike in Dacca (June 7, 1966) by killing 13 participating strikers (Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, UPL, 1988, p. 25)."

Instead of dealing fairly with the legitimate grievances of the neglected eastern province of Pakistan, the power elite of Pakistan took a deliberate decision to suppress the Bengalees' quest for maximum provincial autonomy through the use of colonial types of repressive methods and procedures. Obviously, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the main target of various virulent forms of harassment, intimidation and fraudulent cases. The government intensified its policy of repression and persecution against him and his followers. For example, while Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was touring various districts in April 1966, he was repeatedly arrested in almost all important places on flimsy and fraudulent charges.

Dr. Anisuzzaman, a distinguished literary figure of Bangladesh, has summarised the nature of the repressive measures which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had to confront and endure for starting and sustaining the historic six-point movement at a critical juncture of our history: "During that period (from the middle of February through May 9, 1966), there was hardly any place where Sheikh Mujib was not arrested (on false charges) for addressing public meetings to enlist mass support in favour of the six-point program. Today in Jessore, tomorrow in Khulna, day after tomorrow in Rajshahi, and on the following days in Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Chittagong. Once he was released on bail in one place, he rushed to another place. He had no time to waste.

Six-Point Program. .... The impact of the six-point demand of the Awami League was felt far and wide. The central government (of Pakistan) dubbed it as a demand for the separation of the Eastern wing from the rest of the country, and launched a propaganda campaign which called for a strong central government and decried the autonomists. On June 7, 1966, there was a province-wide hartal (strike) in East Pakistan sponsored by the Awami League to press the demands embodied in the six-point program. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with several lieutenants, was again put into prison. (Sheikh Mujib was put in jail in early May, 1966). The government also blamed 'foreign interests' in the agitation led by the six-pointers -- After about a year, several East Pakistani civil servants and military officers were arrested on the charge that they had conspired to separate the East wing by violent means in collusion with India. Eventually, the so-called 'Agartala Conspiracy case' was initiated against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 31 others for alleged high treason (M. Rashiduzzaman, *The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan*, Asian Survey, Vol. 10, No. 7, July, 1970, pp. 574-587)."

## The impact of the six-point movement

The imprisonment of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other top Awami Leaguers in 1966 could not diminish the mass support for the six-point demand, even though the intensity of the movement could be suppressed. The policy of suppression of all forms of political freedoms and dissenting voices had miserably failed to halt the march of the long-term effects and future implications of the six-point movement. In fact, the many forms of governmental repression and the use of police violence against the organisers and participants of the six-point movement had motivated the general population of the then East Pakistan to render their full support for the six-point formula.

The six-point movement had also far reaching effects on the subsequent political developments in the then Pakistan. As noted by Dr. M. Rashiduzzaman: "The entire weight of the party (the Awami League) was thrown in favour of the anti-Ayub movement, which spread throughout the country in the early months of 1969, and it is likely that the Awami League will play an even more active role in the future (M. Rashiduzzaman, *The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan*, Asian Survey, Vol. 10, No. 7, July, 1970, pp. 574-587)."

In fact, the success of the six-point movement had prompted the arrogant and debased Ayub Khan's dictatorial regime to falsely implicate him in the Agartala Conspiracy case. However, an anti-Ayub mass movement in late 1968 and early 1969 led to the withdrawal of the so-called case and unconditional release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

About the impact of the six-

point program on the 11-point charter of the 1969 student-mass movement, Dr. Rashiduzzaman observed: "For all practical purposes, the eleven-point student program was an expanded version of the Awami League's six-point demand for autonomy." The saliency of the six-point movement in the then Pakistan politics is more evident in the following concluding remarks of Dr. M. Rashiduzzaman: "The real strength of the Awami League is not its organisational skill but the growing popularity of its (Six-Point) program for regional autonomy with the 70 million Bengalis in East Pakistan. We have already noted that a popular movement started in East Pakistan following the announcement of Awami League's six-point program, and the changing pattern of Pakistan politics has eventually led to what is undeniably a separatist movement. Even the stringent repressive measures and centralised administration can't halt the process (of separatism). As the champion of the cause of regional autonomy, the future of the Awami League lies in its capacity to sustain and strengthen the movement (M. Rashiduzzaman, *The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan*, Asian Survey, Vol. 10, No. 7, July, 1970, pp. 574-587)."

Dr. Talukder Maniruzzaman has noted the immediate impact of the governmental repressive measures during the six-point movement on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's popularity in the following words: "As one might have expected, Sheikh Mujib's arrest in 1966 only served to enhance his popularity to the point where he became the veritable symbol of Bengali nationalism (Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, UPL, 1988, p. 23)."

Dr. Rounaq Jahan underscored the following impacts of the six-point movement: "In the spring of 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched his now famous six-point movement. The six-point demand -- especially attractive to the Bengali nationalist bourgeoisie -- was, to date, the most radical demand for East Pakistani autonomy. The six-point movement evoked widespread enthusiasm in East Pakistan. Mass meetings and rallies held throughout the province by the East Pakistan Awami League helped to rejuvenate the moribund party organisation and the Awami-affiliated student party, the East Pakistan Student's League (EPSL). Predictably, the six-point movement broadened the Awami League's base of support in East Pakistan at the cost of West Pakistani support (Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, The University Press, 1994, p. 139)."

Dr. M.B. Nair concludes his authoritative book, *Politics in Bangladesh: A Study of Awami League: 1949-58*, (New Delhi, Northern Book Center, 1990, p. 257) with the following observations about the far reaching effects of the six-point movement: "However, in 1964 when political activities on party basis were permitted, the Awami League (AL) emerged from its seclusion and reorganised itself, so that in 1966 it (AL) was able to give a concrete shape to its long-standing demand for regional autonomy in the form of 'Six-Point Program,' which subsequently was the harbinger of the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state in 1971."

There were also more senior political leaders in other parties, including Maulana Bhasani, the founder of the Awami League, who vocally demanded provincial autonomy for East Pakistan. Being disgusted with West Pakistan's colonial domination and exploitation of East Pakistan, Maulana Bhasani had uttered more than once "goodbye to West Pakistan" -- at least a decade earlier than the historic six-point movement. In fact, Maulana Bhasani was never willing to compromise on the issue of full provincial autonomy for the then East Pakistan. However, it was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's fearlessness and relentlessness that gave a more concrete shape to the autonomy movement in the then East Pakistan.

## Concluding remarks

It is also fair to suggest that the six-point movement was the precursor of the following momentous events: the removal of the infamous Provincial Governor Monem Khan, the sudden collapse of Ayub Khan's dictatorship and the rise of Yahya Khan's diabolical regime, the General Elections in 1970 on the basis of adult franchise, the landslide victory of the Awami League in the general elections, the spectacular rise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the sole spokesperson of the Bengali speaking people of the then Pakistan, the nine-month long liberation war in 1971 under the leadership of the Awami League, and finally the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state on December 16, 1971. Doubtless, these tumultuous events were milestones in the history of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom and independence, and the name of the common thread that had firmly connected these milestones was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

There is no doubt that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would have remained a top Awami League leader even in the absence of a bold provincial autonomy plan in the form of the six-point formula. Had there been no six-point movement in 1966, there is every doubt that the Agartala Conspiracy case would have been hatched against Sheikh Mujib at that particular time. Had there been no Agartala Conspiracy case, the student-mass movement of 1969 may not have taken place. Thus, the six-point movement, Agartala Conspiracy case, and the 1969 student-mass movement had provided the much-needed ground and context for the emergence of Sheikh Mujib as Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal).

Subsequently, the people of the then eastern province of Pakistan had vested their full trust in their Bangabandhu in the general elections of 1970, that made this extraordinary man their legitimate sole spokesperson and undisputed leader. Indeed, it was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the undisputed leader of his people, who had spearheaded Bangladesh's struggle for full-blown independence. The timing, first for framing and articulating the six-point formula, and then launching and sustaining a nationalistic movement for realising the goals of six-point formula, was crucially important. The economic and political demands, as stipulated and enumerated in the historic six-point formula, were the frontal assault on the foundation of Pakistan's colonial and authoritarian modes of governance.

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