THE PEOPLE SPEAK

The people have spoken. Not in dulcet tones wrapped in ambiguity but loud and clear in their demand for revolutionary change. They have rejected the past and the old. They have shown in no uncertain terms that the politics of the 1040's are no longer relevant to the demands of the 1970's. In a demonstration of rare maturity and discrimination for people casting their first such vote in 23 years, they voted all along the line for issues and parties rather than individuals.

In Bangladesh nothing short of a revolution has been recorded in the polling booths. In an unprecedented demonstration of solidarity the people with one voice have proclaimed their total commitment to the cause of Bengali nationalism. Twenty-three years of oppression, exploitation, and the sacrifice in lives, security and suffering of the people of Bangladesh have reached their apotheosis in this historic vote.

It is a vote which has demonstrated in no uncertain terms that an era of our history has been wound up. The age of domination of the majority by a minority is dead and on its grave a new relationship between the regions has to be constructed. The people of Bangladesh do not aspire to rule West Pakistan in recompense for past exploitation -- if this were ever a serious proposition to be tolerated by their rulers. But they will not be denied the sovereign right to rule themselves. Failure to recognise this elemental truth would be no less significant for Pakistan than the Indian Congress rejection of the Cabinet Mission Plan was for India 24 years ago.

It is hoped that the message has gone through to West Pakistan where a new generation has come of age at the polls. The ties of caste and clan, the hold of Pirs and priests, the domination of land and wealth have been shaken up by the onslaught of an awakened people. Mr Bhutto has made a permanent impact on the politics of West Pakistan by arousing the consciousness of the people. This has been done in the face of phenomenal odds, not the least of which was Mr Bhutto's own long and damaging association with the Ayub Raj. He has ensured that from 7 December 1970, West Pakistan will never be the same again.

He now has to face the more formidable task of translating his rhetoric into a programme of assault on the old order. His own, baggage of Zamindars, who having cashed in on his charisma in riding to victory, will be less than enthusiastic about committing social hara kiri Victory in the legislatures still leaves the bastions of privilege in the bureaucracy, land and business intact and waiting to sabotage the verdict of the polls. Whether Mr Bhutto has the resources to destroy their hold or will be forced to compromise with them will determine whether this election will be more than just a revolution in attitudes for West Pakistan.

Much will depend on how Bhutto reacts to the strident reality of Bangla nationalism. Sheikh Mujib has been given a total and unqualified mandate by the people of Bangladesh to bring autonomy to the province through the medium of his 6 points/11 points programme. Not even the Quaid-e-Azam was given such total support in his articulation of the cause of Muslim nationalism. Sheikh Mujib is now the captive of his own charisma and his party's massive victory at the polls. The people of Bangladesh have won for themselves the right to full regional autonomy spelt out in the 6-point programme and will not settle for less.

Sheikh Mujib is fully aware of this. Nor is he unaware that his own eminence and electoral success owes to the fact that he is now riding the hightide of Bengali nationalism and that his survival as its unchallenged leader depends on his unrelenting commitment to the cause.

It is to be hoped that the new forces in the West realise as much. Mr Bhutto comes to power without the hang-ups of the generation of West wing leaders now buried with their hypocritical cliches of integration used so liberally to mask their plunder of East pakistan. He is a West Pakistani leader without pretensions to a national base. He can either assume the imperial toga now lying tattered on the battlefield and attempt to carry on where others left off. Or he can come to terms with the reality of the polls in East Pakistan and help rebuild Pakistan around a loose federal structure with the base of power now moving to the regions.

But if Mr Bhutto cannot break with the colonial past and President Yahya invokes his LFO to repudiate the will of the people of Bangladesh then the elections may well prove to be the last act in the drama of our brief nationhood. As we have said before, the LFO is irrelevant. The real question is not over national integrity but who interprets its meaning. 70 million people -- 55% of the nation's population -- have given their own verdict. Will one man, even if he be President, now choose to declare that his interpretation is sovereign over the collective wisdom of 70 million people? If he chooses to do so, he must do it in the full knowledge that for the first time in the nation's 23-year history he will be putting the survival of Pakistan at stake.



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The views expressed by writers in these columns are not necessarily shared by the journal.

next Saturday

THE LEFT IN EAST BENGAL

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