In the course of the election campaign, one important opposition figure, Khwaja Nazimuddin, passed away. Retired lieutenant general Azam Khan, once close to Ayub Khan and one of the men involved in the imposition of martial law in 1958 and subsequently governor of East Pakistan until he fell out with the president, went around the country soliciting support for Miss Jinnah. At one point, Ayub made a crude comment on Azam: 'uss ke demagh me bhusa bhara hua hai (there is chaff in his brain)'. I recall that many Pakistanis thought it was a witty remark, which it was not.

In 1968, there were many people in the western part of Pakistan who were quite excited by the idea of a Bhutto presidency. You see, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had left the Ayub cabinet in mid-1966, formed the Pakistan People's Party in late 1967 and in early 1968 informed Pakistanis that he meant to challenge his former mentor at the next presidential election scheduled for 1970. The news even made it into Time magazine. But, of course, there was no Ayub-Bhutto contest since events were soon to overtake Pakistan. But let us remind ourselves that sometime in the early 1960s, when Bhutto was general secretary of the Ayub faction of the Muslim League, known as the Convention Muslim League, he proposed in public that Ayub Khan be declared president of Pakistan for life. That was quintessential Bhutto for you. We know of the rest of the course his life was to take.

The December 1970 elections in Pakistan, its first and one that led to its break-up, were hugely exciting. In East Pakistan, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman crisscrossed the province seeking support for his party's Six Points. While he described the elections as a referendum on the Six Points, many of his West Pakistani opponents, such as Khan Abdul Qayyum Khan, glibly told West Pakistanis that they had visited Dhaka and had found no support for Mujib and his party. Bhutto went around preaching a curious mix of Islam, democracy and socialism. He was neither Islamic nor democratic nor a socialist. In the east, Moulana Bhashani proved rash yet once again when he decided to stay away from the elections. On 4 December, a mere three days before the voting, he 'declared' the 'independence' of East Pakistan from the rest of the country.

Be that as it may, the history of elections in our part of the world, especially that concerning Pakistan and Bangladesh (remember, we were one country once upon a time), has never been of a comforting kind.



The landslide victory of the Awami League led by Bangabandhu was a shocking awakening for the Pakistani regime.

The results of the elections stunned the Yahya Khan regime, which had been advised by military intelligence that the Awami League would not win enough seats to form a government, which in turn meant that all the other parties could together cobble a government into shape in Islamabad. Of course, that did not happen. And of course the regime and men like Bhutto refused to hand over power to the Bengalis. The result was disaster for Pakistan, propitious for the people of Bangladesh.

You could go on talking about elections for a long time. In free Bangladesh, Khondokar Moshtaque lost the 1973 elections, but then the government maneouvred things in a way that the loser eventually became the winner. In 1979, all the old collaborators of the Pakistan army took part in general elections, thanks to the machinations of General Ziaur Rahman. In 1986, the Awami League was left red-faced when it announced its intention of taking part in the elections called by the Ershad regime. It was supposed to compete for 150 parliamentary seats, with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party going for the remaining 150 seats. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia were to make simultaneous announcements, at the same time and from different places. In the event, the BNP backed out without warning. Later, it castigated the Awami League as a party that had legitimised Ershad's military government.

Ah, so many stories to tell! But let us call it a day.

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