Ayub's Diaries

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What better source to understand the West Pakistani mindset about East Pakistan than to delve into the remarks in Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, who ruled the country from 1958 to 1969? The diaries, published posthumously by the Oxford University Press in 2007, reveal his attitudes and thinking about Bengalis and the inter-wing issues. To him, East Pakistan's relatively slow rate of growth was because of lack of investment opportunities and availability of skilled labour and infrastructure. These were also the reasons why more foreign aid and investments went to West Pakistan.

As government officers in Rawalpindi and Islamabad in the mid-to- late nineteen-sixties, a few of us watched and experienced at close quarters how East Pakistan's reasonable demands were suppressed on one flimsy ground or the other, usually on the ground of lack of its absorptive capacity. In 1969, towards the last phase of united Pakistan, the fourth Five Year Plan (FYP) was drawn up by the Pakistan Planning Commission with a larger share of the allocations going to West Pakistan. Some of us, the Bengali CSP officers in the central economic ministries and the Planning Commission, lobbied the East Pakistani central ministers verbally and through written notes briefing them to speak out in the cabinet deliberations of the plan for a more equitable distribution of investment funds, if necessary by reducing West Pakistan's plan allocations. They were successful in blocking the approval of the draft plan.

However, in view of the general elections in late 1970 and the subsequent constitutional impasse, the plan discussions became moot. After the breakdown of the talks between the East Pakistan's leaders and the Yahya regime in March 1971, murderous oppression and killings started in East Pakistan, which completely alienated the Bengali population. As a result of the activities of the Bengali freedom fighters, the intervention of the Indian Army and world opinion, Bangladesh was born before the end of the year.

The implications of the 1965 Indo-Pak war, the Agartala conspiracy case against Sheikh Mujib (1967-69) and others, the fiery political agitations of 1969 and the results of the 1970 elections were not fully appreciated by the government in Pakistan. They, particularly the army junta, were oblivious of the mood of the people of East Pakistan, who though not yet necessarily desirous of complete separation from Pakistan, wanted full provincial autonomy and the dignity and power of the majority wing in the state of Pakistan under a loose confederation.

As amply demonstrated by the ignorant remarks of the Sandhurst trained Ayub, there was something fundamentally wrong in West Pakistani assessment of the Bengali faith and cultural tradition.

By this time, the Pakistani authorities may have written off East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan, particularly as they realised that East Pakistan's demands had to be fully conceded. It appears, however, that in some powerful section of the West Pakistani army there was still a belief that one last attempt at forcibly subjugating the Bengalis might be worthwhile. They did not take into account the will of the people, India's strength and extent to which it would get involved and the lack of determination of the US and the Chinese governments to intervene forcefully. They may have believed that Sheikh Mujib, who fought hard for the creation of Pakistan, would not in the end destroy Pakistan. Some of them even mistakenly believed that the prize of becoming the prime minister of Pakistan was great and Sheikh Mujib might in the end make some concessions in the Six-Points demands for the sake of keeping Pakistan together. From his diaries it seems Ayub also believed so.

Going back to the Ayub times, Zaker Hossain, then governor of East Pakistan, had in 1960 placed before Ayub the province's demands for economic resources. Ayub wondered if the governor had himself drafted those unacceptable proposals. The latter replied that it had come from the chief secretary (a West Pakistani CSP officer) who was present at the meeting. In late 1967, I had personally heard from Dr MN Huda, the then East Pakistan's Finance Minister, how Ayub rebuked him before others for merely pointing out that disparity between the East and West growth rates. Altaf Gauhar, when asked by Ayub to reply, said that the rate of growth in disparity had decreased but the overall disparity between the two wings had increased. It was a Machiavellian state-