

The Talk between Mujib, Yahya and Bhutto in Dacca, Preparation for Massacre and Its Reflection in *The New York Times* (16-25 March 1971)

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Abstract:

Following the 1970 election, the implementation of provincial autonomy was the main area of disagreement between the then-Pakistani government, the non-Bengali-supporting Pakistan Peoples Party, and the Bengali-supporting Awami League. On March 1, 1971, President General Yahya Khan postponed the Assembly without giving a certain date for its reconvening, which sparked a non-cooperation movement in East Pakistan. Subsequently, on March 16, 1971, Yahya and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League, started their much-awaited discussion. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the Peoples Party, joined them on March 21. Beginning on March 16, *The New York Times*, an international daily newspaper, began to report on the progress of the talks. Hence, the newspaper made Bengalis' public sentiments visible. This article aims to identify, analyse, and clarify the function of *The New York Times* from March 16–25, 1971.

Keywords: Elections, The Talks, Constitutional Crisis, Provincial Autonomy, National Integration, Declaration of Independence

1. Introduction:

From 7 December 1970 to 17 January 1971, Pakistan held free elections to choose representatives in order to draft a constitution and create a domestic system. For the first time, the elections were conducted according to the one-man, one-vote concept, which presupposed that East Pakistan would receive a majority of both votes and seats. The Awami League [henceforth AL] won 298 seats out of 310 in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly and 167 seats out of 169 (167 out of 313 overall) in the National Assembly of Pakistan, giving them the mandate to form the Provincial and Central Government (Rahman, 2009a). It received 38.3% of the vote nationwide and 82% of the vote in East Pakistan (Osmany, 2014). With 88 seats, the left-wing Pakistan Peoples Party [henceforth PPP] was the second-largest party in the National

Assembly. With the decisive victory of the Bengalis in the 1970 elections, the civil-military bureaucracy's reactionary politics came to an end, and everyone was urged to put forward a workable constitution based on the Six-point program, which emphasised provincial autonomy. It was declared in the program that the Federal Government should deal with only two subjects – defence and foreign affairs – with all residuary subjects vested in the federating states (Arefin, 2015). However, the leaders of West Pakistan were hesitant to cede control to the Bengalis. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the chairman of the PPP, reacted negatively to the Bengalis' overwhelming victory. He was against the provincial autonomy. The PPP refused to wait another five years and to hold the opposition seats in the National Assembly.

Following a meeting with Yahya three days prior, Bhutto displayed the traits of an unstable and greedy politician on February 15 in Peshwar when he announced that the PPP would not attend the National Assembly session in Dacca beginning on March 3, 1971, because they could not travel there solely to support the AL's constitution. On February 28, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the chairman of the AL, responded to Bhutto's announcement by saying that he was open to any constructive suggestions and that the Six-point plan would not be forced upon anyone because it was not only presented for the people of Bangladesh but also for the people of Punjab, North West Frontier Province, Sind, and Baluchistan ("No Imposition of Six Points", 1971). On March 1, Yahya complied with Bhutto by delaying the Assembly without announcing when it will meet again. Yahya's move makes it clear that he was exploiting Bhutto's ambitions against the interests of the Bengali people. It was widely believed that the civil-military bureaucracy that governed Pakistan's sectarian structure would never permit Bengalis' rights to be realised. At the time, Mujib was under a lot of pressure to seek total independence. But Mujib thought they should avoid doing anything that would allow the government to blame the AL and justify a military crackdown. He made several demands in his speech on March 7, including the immediate handover of power to the people's elected representatives, the end of Martial Law, the military's withdrawal to their barracks, and a judicial investigation into army deaths in East Pakistan. Additionally, he cautioned the populace to get ready for independence.

The people of Bangladesh strained the limits of non-cooperation between March 1 and March 25, 1971, and the Mujib had set up a de facto government in East Pakistan. Meanwhile, at Mujib's command, Colonel Osmany established contact with the Bengali police, the East Pakistan Rifles, and East Bengal battalions, and a few AL volunteers, students, and former military men received training in weapons (Salik, 1997). Yahya and his avaricious civil-military bureaucracy began assembling West Pakistani forces in Bangladesh by the middle of February 1971. Up to two brigades of soldiers and the 9th and 16th divisions were transported into Bangladesh with the required assistance between March 1 and 25. It was practically difficult in mid-March 1971 to find a way to balance the demands of West Pakistan and East Pakistan in order to unite what had been two countries from the beginning into one.

In that regard, Mujib and Yahya's much anticipated negotiations began on March 16, 1971, and lasted until March 25, 1971. Bhutto became one of them on March 21, 1971. From March 16 onwards, *The New York Times* [henceforth NYT] began to report on the progress of the negotiations, including analyses on later issues pertaining to the Pakistan crisis. Therefore, this study aims to identify, analyse, and clarify the function of NYT during the talks between Mujib, Yahya, and Bhutto in Dacca from March 16–25, 1971.

2. Review of Literature

The Liberation War in Bangladesh has already been the subject of several books. Some of these works concentrated on the Liberation War itself, some on the events preceding up to it, and some on both. However, it is fair to say that not much has been done thus far, especially when it comes to the relationship and interaction between the immediate context of the Liberation War of Bangladesh and *NYT*'s involvement in March 1971. For example, *NYT* has served as a source rather than being critically examined in works such as *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (Choudhury 2011), *The Blood Telegram* (Bass 2013), *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh* (Blood 2002), *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Sisson and Rose 1990) and *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Raghavan 2013).

In his book, G. W. Choudhury (2011), who was a member of the Pakistan Cabinet from April 1969 to February 1971, articulated the backdrop that contributed to Pakistan's shift from military to civilian governance. In his research, Bass (2013) focused on the American eyewitnesses' accounts of the crimes against humanity that took place during the nine months of the Liberation War in Bangladesh. The author also concentrated on China's perspective in this situation. Blood (2002) in his book discussed the account of the emergence of Bangladesh through the eyes of a sympathetic American diplomat based in Dacca during the gathering of the storm in 1970 leading to the War of Liberation in 1970. Sisson and Rose (1990) used data from previously unobtainable sources to reconstruct the intricate decision-making involved in the 1971 partition of Pakistan and the ensuing conflict between India and Pakistan. In his research, Raghavan (2013) rediscovered the global significance of Bangladesh's establishment in 1971, particularly during the Cold War. However, none of these works addressed the *NYT*'s response in March 1971 to the events that preceded the Bangladesh Liberation War, especially the development of the talks between Bhutto, Yahya, and Mujib in Dacca from March 16–25, 1971. This incident has significant significance in the history of Bangladesh's rise since the rupture in the conversation served as the direct backdrop for the conflict.

3. Materials and Methods

This study's primary goal is to critically and thoroughly examine how a major American news outlet, such as *NYT*, responded to the discussion between Bhutto, Yahya, and Mujib in Dacca between March 16 and 25, 1971. The basic method of this research will be a historical approach. A historical chronology will be used for the recounting and analysis of the occurrences. Simultaneously, news articles will be examined using the content analysis method to pinpoint specific characteristics. *NYT* issues published throughout the aforementioned period will all be considered primary sources. An analysis of the various government documents issued in 1971 by the concerned governments will be an important part of this process. These documents will also be used as primary sources in this article. At the same time, various newspapers, books, and articles will also be used as secondary sources.

4. The Talk (16-25 March 1971)

General Peerzada and Justice Cornelius headed Yahya's team during the conversation with Mujib. The third and fourth members of Yahya's team were Colonel Hasan of the Chief Martial Law Office in Rawalpindi and M. M. Ahmed, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. Aside from that, the majority of the Pakistani army's top brass were in Dacca and met frequently at the city's military headquarters. Top party leaders Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam,

Mustaq Ahmed, A. H. Qamruzzaman, Monsur Ali, and Dr. Kamal Hossain made up Mujib's negotiating team. Although they did not actively engage, several Bengali economists provided assistance to the team (Choudhury, 2011).

Mujib declared that the meeting will go on after the first day. According to Yahya, Mujib would have to include the party of the western majority ("Mujib-Yahya Meeting", 1971). Mujib announced his commitment to carry the movement through to its final triumph on March 17, the second day of the gathering (Rahman, 2009a). During the meeting, Yahya told Mujib that he was dedicated to the handover of power. However, same evening, he told General Tikka Khan, 'Be ready, the bastard [Mujib] is not behaving' (Salik, 1997). Mujib rejected the panel of inquiry established by the Martial Law Administrator to investigate the circumstances that led to the army being called in to support civil authority in different sections of East Pakistan between March 2 and 9, 1971, while the negotiations were underway ("Mujib Declines", 1971). On March 19, 1971, Mujib saw Yahya in the morning, and that same evening, three of his counsellors had separate meetings with Yahya's advisers. He asked international reporters to remain by Bangladesh's plight and wait for updates on fresh developments (Rahman, 2009a).

On March 20, Mujib for the first time voiced his delight, stating that they were moving towards a political settlement (Rahman, 2009a). However, Yahya stated that there were no significant concerns and that the relevant experts could draft an interim constitution that reflected the AL tenets. The fundamental points of agreement were: a. Presidential Proclamation ending Martial Law and handing over power to a civilian government; b. Transfer of power in the majority parties' provinces; c. Yahya continuing to serve as President and dominate the Central Government; and d. Separate sessions of the National Assembly members from East and West Pakistan in advance of a joint session of the House to finalise the Constitution (Rahman, 2009b). The agreement was limited to the time frame between the end of Martial Law and the Assembly's adoption of the new constitution. Bhutto, who was worried that Mujib could be negotiating with the smaller parties, was placated by the overall scheme, especially the separate assembly session (Rahman, 2009a). It was unanimously decided that the power structure should, to the greatest extent feasible, resemble the final constitution's regional autonomy (Rahman, 2009b). The representatives of the AL recommended that Yahya bring in a statutory draughtsman to create the required proclamation after they had reached a reasonable level of agreement on an interim constitution by March 20, 1971 (before to Bhutto's arrival). However, Yahya persisted in pressuring the AL to create their own draft (The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, 2017). By March 20, 1971, the negotiations had advanced enough that Yahya summoned Bhutto to Dacca.

Bhutto and his aides arrived in Dacca on March 21, 1971, and following their meeting with Yahya, he declared that everything would be alright (Rahman, 2009a). It is evident that Bhutto and Mujib shared no common ground. Bhutto made several demands, including: a. the continuation of Martial Law until the new constitution was enacted; b. the requirement that a majority of each wing's members approve any proposed constitution; and c. the requirement that any constitution approved by the National Assembly be subject to the Presidential veto under the Legal Framework Order (The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, 2017). In that way, Bhutto would get veto power for himself. Bhutto later recalled his position as follows:

Martial Law was the source of law then obtaining in Pakistan and the very basis of the President's authority; with the proclamation lifting Martial Law, the President and the Central Government would have lost their legal authority and sanction. There would be a vacuum unless the National Assembly was called into being establish a new source of sovereign power on the national level. If, in the absence of any such national source, power were transferred as proposed in the provinces, the government of each province could acquire de facto and de jure sovereign status (Bhutto, 1971).

Yahya postponed the National Assembly session that was supposed to begin on March 25 after holding a tripartite meeting with Bhutto and Mujib on March 22 ("National Assembly Session", 1971). A. K. Brohi, a constitutionalist lawyer from West Pakistan, dismissed any legal challenges or obstacles to the people's transfer of power on March 22. He used the Indian Independence Act as an example in a written opinion (Rahman, 2009a). Following Brohi's legal judgement, Yahya and his team decided that authority may be transferred by Presidential Proclamation in accordance with the Indian Independence Act of 1947's precedent (Rahman, 2009b).

During the Pakistan National Day, new Bangladeshi flag was raised on March 23 at hundreds of public and private structures, including the Soviet Consulate and the British High Commission. The Pakistani flag was raised by the Chinese, Iranian, Indonesian, and Nepalese embassies. The American Embassy did not raise a flag (Salik, 1997). *The Pakistan White Paper*, published by the Pakistani government on August 5, 1971, states that on March 23, 1971, AL representatives transmitted a draft proclamation to Yahya's advisors (The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, 2017). Dr. Kamal Hossain prepared the text, which was 26 typed pages long, began with a preamble, included 18 articles with a lengthy timetable and a lot of subclauses, and was signed by Tajuddin Ahmed and other AL aides (Choudhury, 2011). The AL's draft proclamation outlined its negotiating position, which advocated for the establishment of a confederation rather than a federation. Mujib attempted to depart from the notion of 'One Unit' in a constitutional manner in this way. Yahya Khan never rejected the AL's proposal till March 24, 1971.

In order to prepare the interregnum settlement, Yahya's team on March 23, 1971, provided a list of three amendments. These changes were as follows: a. The State Bank in Dacca would take over this role for Bangladesh since it would take time for the chatters and the new reserve bank to emerge. The State Bank of Pakistan would have the authority to step in if there was a conflict in regional monetary policies; b. Current arrangements for financing the centre in revenue and foreign exchange would continue; c. A joint delegation would go to the consortium, which could be dominated by Bengalis and divided according to a predetermined formula; after aid was pledged at the consortium, the provinces could negotiate individual agreements on their own (Rahman, 2009b).

In response the AL adopted the amendments with a few minor phrasing changes during its meeting on March 24, 1971. On March 24, 1971, Bhutto declared that the talks were still going on, that they were making headway, and that he would remain in Dacca for however long it took (Rahman, 2009a). Bhutto's remark affirmed that the disputing parties had come to a basic understanding. In addition to Bhutto, Yahya's actions are not in doubt, and it is clear that he was only playing for time and had no intention of coming to a deal with the AL. Major General

Khadim Raja and Major General Rao Forman Ali met in the GOC's office early on March 18, 1971, to create the fundamental operational plan that became known as 'Operation Searchlight' (Salik, 1997). While the AL leaders awaited a final meeting to approve the draft proclamation, Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25 after allowing the Pakistani army complete control to eradicate all Bengalis. After being warned over the phone that Yahya had left Dacca and that the army was getting ready for a crackdown, Mujib refused to leave the house. 'If I go into hiding, they will burn the whole of Dacca to find me,' he said to an advisor who escaped capture (Rahman, 2009a). The Pakistani army positioned itself at several strategic points and started to depart their barracks just before ten o'clock at night. The mass killings against the unarmed Bengalis started just before midnight.

Thus, the eagerly anticipated 'talk' was merely a means of buying time for the Bengalis to be exterminated.

5. Role of *The New York Times*

Beginning on March 16, 1971, *NYT* began reporting on the progress of the negotiations, including analyses on later issues pertaining to the Pakistan problem. *NYT* ran a piece on Mujib on March 15, 1971, just one day prior to the discussion. Mujib was referred to as 'the undisputed leader of the people of east Pakistan' in the paper (Durdin, 1971a). In another article on March 16, 1971, the paper expressed doubts about Pakistan's ability to maintain its integrity in the future. 'The East has already by passed the authority of the central Government's military administration here and has established a system of voluntary self-rule...that is just sort of independence,' it said, exposing the actual political situation of the eastern part of Pakistan while outlining the history of conflict between its two wings (Durdin, 1971b).

The paper also noted that the relationship between the military and the people of East Pakistan was steadily deteriorating and that the idea of independence was a powerful motivator for the public opinion in the East. As a result, the traditional name of the reign, Bengal Homeland or Bangla Desh, had already supplanted the term 'East Pakistan'. The article claimed that a loose confederation between the East and the West might be the only way forward, citing a high-ranking AL source (Durdin, 1971b). These facts from *NYT* are comparable to those from Pakistan's White Paper. Later, in a draft proclamation filed on March 23, 1971, the AL moved beyond the idea of a federation to create a 'confederation,' according to the *Pakistan White Paper* (The Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, 2017). Based on the information provided above, it can be concluded that the AL and Mujib led a confederation plan from the start of the negotiations with Yahya on March 16. Mujib had the idea that a loose confederation would be more useful for achieving independence in the future.

East and West Bengal's Bengali communities were ardent fans of Mujib. Even though the leaders of West Pakistan were negotiating, Mujib managed to draw attention to himself. The entire incident also caught the attention of West Bengal's Bengali people. The popularity of Mujib and the disfavour of Yahya among Bengalis were covered by the *NYT*. In an article on March 16, 1971, the popularity of Mujib in the Hindu community and the shared ties between Bengalis in Bangladesh and West Bengal were examined. It stated that Mujib was the talk of the town at the time and that Indians were proud of him at coffee shops, on the streets, in living

rooms, in discotheques, and on the front pages of newspapers in ‘Calcutta’ (Schanberg, 1971a). According to *NYT*, Mujib’s popularity stemmed from his ‘no communal bias.’ Similar to several of the earlier articles, the daily reiterated its prediction regarding Bangladesh’s independence by stating that recent events had increased the likelihood of a declaration of independence or something similar (Schanberg, 1971a).

Following the first day’s discussion, neither Yahya nor Mujib provided any updates. (Rahman, 2009a). On March 17, 1971, a piece in *NYT* detailed the evolution of the first-day meeting and referred to Mujib as ‘the political leader of rebellious East Pakistan.’ Yahya’s unpopularity in Bangladesh was also revealed in that piece, which also claimed that on the night of Yahya’s arrival from West Pakistan, protesters had marched by with the slogans ‘Down with Yahya!’, ‘Enemy troops go home!’ and ‘Independent Bangladesh!’ (Durdin, 1971c).

The general population and foreigners in Pakistan were in a nervous state during the talks. Foreigners began fleeing Dacca in the second week of March 1971 due to the political conflict and fear of unchecked bloodshed between Pakistan’s two wings. Nervous Bengalis were escaping West Pakistan because of fear of violence, while Punjabis and other West Pakistanis were escaping Bangladesh in the opposite direction. Pakistani aircraft were not allowed to fly across Indian territory at the time. After two Kashmiris hijacked an Indian jet and detonated it in Pakistan, India barred all Pakistani aircraft from flying over Indian territory (Osmany, 2014). On March 18, 1971, a special item was published in *NYT* about the flight of West Pakistanis and Bengalis. Journalist Sydney H. Schanberg attempted to determine the causes of evacuation and to sketch the general evacuation scenario in that piece. He wrote, ‘They were taking all their gold jewelry, their transistor radios, blankets and their best clothes. Some of the luggage was modern but more often it consisted of shopping bags tied together with string (Schanberg, 1971b). ‘As the Boeing 707 swept up the Bay of Bengal and came within sight of the East Pakistan coastline, the Bengalis rose from their seats en masse and pressed to the windows, their faces alright,’ Schanberg said, attempting to capture the faces of the escaping Bengalis as their plane touched the Bay of Bengal coastline (Schanberg, 1971b). ‘The East Pakistanis threaten secession because of what they regard as years of exploitation by the Western wing,’ *NYT* said in that piece, which also defended the call for independence (Schanberg, 1971b).

NYT was optimistic that a solution would be found and stated that it would be challenging but not impossible. In addition to its optimism, *NYT* expressed scepticism about the long-term viability of any compromise and forecast that, should a patchwork agreement be struck, it would likely collapse quickly. This paper’s forecast was realised six days later on the evening of March 25, when a planned atrocity against unarmed Bengalis was implemented, despite the fact that negotiations between Bhutto, Yahya, and Mujib did not break down. Since the AL and Mujib had been in charge of both public and private affairs, the publication thought that East Pakistan had already declared its independence in all but name (“Pakistan Talks Continue”, 1971). *NYT* also asserted, citing ‘knowledgeable sources,’ that Mujib would prefer to reach a solution, even if it just maintained a tenuous or symbolic connection between the two halves of the nation (“Pakistan Talks Continue”, 1971).

One of *NYT*’s editorials from March 19, 1971, suggested that the meeting between Mujib and Yahya would determine Pakistan’s future, provides a clear explanation of the newspaper’s

perspective on the Pakistan crisis. ‘Yahya will be faced with a terrible choice: either to attempt to reimpose martial rule over 73 million rebellious Bengalis in the eastern state, a task that is certain to be bloody and perhaps would be impossible, or to accept the dissolution of Pakistan,’ the editorial in *NYT* said, expressing fear that if talks broke down, there could be serious consequences (“Fateful Talks”, 1971). On the evening of March 25, the military government in West Pakistan started a blood bath and planned killings, defying *NYT*’s warning. Instead of a Bengali breakaway, the report recommended a weaker Pakistani federation and cautioned the sub-continental leaders about the negative consequences of a split, pointing out that it may trigger more secessionist attempts in India and the rest of Pakistan, plunging the entire subcontinent into anarchy (“Fateful Talks”, 1971).

The same day, the paper released a report, that detailed the progress of negotiations between Yahya and Mujib. When Yahya postponed the March 3 session of the National assembly, in which the AL held a majority, on March 1, 1971, Mujib rejected a commission of inquiry on March 18, 1971, which was announced by the Martial Law administration to look into the killings by soldiers of East Pakistani civilians who demonstrated in the streets during the discussion (Rahman, 2009a). According to *NYT*, the investigation was ‘the least important of several concessions’ that Mujib had stated had to be made before he would take the assembly session into consideration (Schanberg, 1971c). Additionally, certain statistics regarding the growing West Pakistani military presence in several East Pakistani fronts were included in the article. It stated that there were then between 40,000 and 60,000 West Pakistani forces in East Pakistan, up from 25,000 previously. Additionally, it stated that Pakistan International Airways’ commercial planes were transporting troops in civilian attire from Karachi to Dacca (Schanberg 1971c). This material from the March 19, 1971, paper demonstrates that Yahya was merely buying time to launch a crackdown, and that the mass killings on March 25 and beyond was carefully thought out and prearranged. In order to prevent any bloodshed with the army, the paper commended Mujib’s tactic of non-cooperation and noted that it was this movement that had essentially placed Mujib in control of East Pakistan. (Schanberg, 1971c).

For the first time, the staff from both sides was called together for a working level meeting when Mujib said on March 20 that his advisers would meet with the President’s aides to try to come up with a formula. *NYT* said that the general belief in East Pakistan was that the negotiations might fail due to the erratic nature of the conflict, which focused on the region’s fight to stop West Pakistan’s control over its affairs. *NYT*, citing the most trustworthy source, assumed that since both parties had reached the rafting stage, Mujib consented to send his senior experts to meet with Yahya’s advisers. ‘Some tentative agreement in principle has been reached,’ *NYT* suggested (Schanberg, 1971d). *NYT* also revealed the strong public support for independence in their report from March 20, 1971. During that time, some independence-related phrases were widely used. While the talk was going on, the demonstrators were demanding independences as the paper reported:

As the 51-year-old Bengali leader rode out of the heavily guarded presidential compound in his white Toyota, hundreds of ebullient, dancing students swarmed around the car and shouted the words that have become the slogans of his movement: ‘Shadhin Bangla Desh!’ —Independent Bengal Nation! and ‘Joi Bangla!’—Victory for Bengal! (Schanberg, 1971d)

It's intriguing that the paper illustrated the passionate nature of the independence movement using Bengali terms.

Three separate pieces about the progress of Yahya's negotiations with the political leaders of East and West Pakistan in Dacca to devise a plan were published by *NYT* on March 21, 1971. In one of the articles *NYT* declared, citing sources close to the negotiations, that two sides were discussing some sort of temporary agreement for the shift from military to civilian control, even if Mujib did not reveal the nature of the formula to end the impasse. The study also stated that until the National Assembly created a new constitutional framework for the nation, the Provincial Assemblies could function as the governments of the five provinces (Schanberg, 1971e). This conjecture is comparable to Tajuddin's speech on April 17, 1971. Tajuddin stated that the delegation of authority to the dominant party in the provinces was one of the fundamental areas of agreement between Mujib and Yahya (Rahman, 2009b). The leaders of West Pakistan's smaller provinces were also afraid, according to the paper, that the largest province, Punjab, which housed the military, the big business interests, and all of the West Pakistani establishment, would retaliate brutally after losing control of East Pakistan and might attempt to use force to govern the smaller provinces. Three days after the report was published, on the evening of March 25, that fear was realised.

NYT published another article that same day, which detailed Bhutto's declaration that an agreement on the nature of the proposed constitution must be reached before the Assembly convened. Bhutto had announced his intention to travel to Dacca to participate in the negotiations. 'The interim regime... would nominally exercise power while the National Assembly met and adopted a new constitution.' *NYT* said in the same story, which also conjectured about the nature of understanding, 'The Assembly would then serve as the primary legislative body in the establishment of a permanent government under the new constitution' ('More Hope Seen', 1971). This hypothesis of the paper was also correct as Rehman Sobhan, one of the advisers of Mujib remarked in this regard, 'Mujib's conditions pertained only to the interim phase between the lifting of Martial Law and the passing of the new constitution by the Assembly' (Rahman, 2009).

NYT's weekly sub-section 'The World,' which is part of the Sunday special section 'The Week in Review,' released an analytical piece on the political impasse in Pakistan on March 21. In addition to expressing the dread of mass killings, the publication revealed that the military had increased the number of garrisons in the East, and many Bengalis were afraid of an army bloodbath that would prevent them from achieving independence or significant self-rule (Schanberg, 1971f).

Under strict military surveillance, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the head of the PPP, arrived in Dacca on March 20, 1971, to take part in the negotiations that had begun on March 16. Similar to some previous editions, on March 22, 1971, *NYT* carried an item that detailed the progress of ongoing negotiations with Yahya and other pertinent issues pertaining to the Pakistan problem. The story revealed the Bengali public's disapproval of Bhutto. Bengalis yelled, 'Murderer Bhutto, go home!' 'Get out of Bangladesh!' and 'Joi Bangla!' as he made his way from the airport to the Hotel Intercontinental. They also shouted and looked at him with disdain (Schanberg, 1971g).

NYT was pessimistic about the prospects of any settlement, despite the fact that the parties involved were attempting to come up with a formula. It stated, as some earlier reports had, that the grievances of the East Pakistanis over their long-standing dominance by the western region were so profound that any compromise that might be reached now would eventually fall apart, and the next push would be for full independence. In the same article, *NYT* discussed the new flag of 'Bangladesh,' which 'has a forest green background with a red circle in the middle; on the circle is a map of East Pakistan in gold.' The article also mentioned the demand for independence and stated that the Bengalis intended to unveil the new flag in large numbers on Pakistan Day (March 23), when numerous demonstrations from Bangladesh were also scheduled (Schanberg, 1971g). This report was crucial because it exposed the Yahya regime's autocratic and authoritarian nature to the world by revealing that West Pakistani troops had killed numerous Bengali civilians during the protest demonstration against the National Assembly's postponement that took place in East Pakistan (Schanberg, 1971g).

On March 23, 1971, *NYT* published two separate pieces regarding the turmoil in Pakistan. Following a meeting with Bhutto and Mujib, Yahya Khan postponed the National Assembly session for the second time on March 22. In one of the items the paper suggested that political leaders should postpone reading an agreement for a while. The report also made the assumption that before accepting an interim agreement, Mujib would demand that Bhutto and Yahya agree on the fundamentals of the new constitution. Tajuddin's speech to the country on April 17, 1971, makes it clear that the paper's premise was accurate. He said that Mujib and Yahya had agreed that the central government's power structure should, to the greatest extent feasible, resemble the final constitution, which was anticipated to be based on the Six-point (Rahman, 2009b). In its March 23 story, *NYT* claimed that Bhutto exerted pressure to postpone the Assembly on March 1, 1971, along with hardline West Pakistani generals and corporate interests who did not want to cede control of East Pakistan. 'One thing seems clear now in his tense and fluid situation – the army, a West Pakistani instrument, has apparently decided not to try to use violence to find a solution' the publication asserted firmly, despite the army's dread of employing force (Schanberg, 1971h). Although some speculation of *NYT* about Pakistan crisis was correct, this time it went wrong on the night of 25 March 1971.

Pakistan's economy was under tremendous strain as a result of the impasse caused by the National Assembly's delay on March 1. The stoppage of trade between the East and the West during the non-cooperation movement had a significant negative impact on Western manufacturers and traders. As a result, businesspeople in Pakistan's major manufacturing hubs, Karachi and Lahore, petitioned Yahya Khan's military government to accede to Eastern demands. In another piece published on March 23, 1971, *NYT* attempted to explain the rationale behind the demands of West Pakistani businessmen. It clarified that 40% of the production of Western manufacturers, including those that produced clothing, yarn, medications, metal goods, shoes, cement, and processed foods, was sold in East Pakistan, which was the largest export market for Western goods. *NYT* also stated that the East was losing money from exports to the West, and in certain situations, this was making it difficult for Westerners to cope because the East used to supply all of the newsprint and betel leaves needed in the West (Durdin, 1971d). The economic disparity between the two wings is revealed in this paper's explanatory report. It reveals the underlying reality of the West Pakistani economy, which is that East Pakistan was always economically exploited and that West Pakistan's dominance over East Pakistan was

nearly identical to that of the British colonial authorities (Durdin, 1971d). Thus, in its March 23, 1971, article, *NYT* endorsed Mujib's long-standing grievance that 'the East is being used as a colony and a market.'

On March 24, 1971, *NYT* ran a story about the celebration of 'Resistance Day' and the unveiling of the new 'Bangla Desh' flag. The article referred to Dacca as Yahya's 'hostile city'. In this article, *NYT* reported that there were no signs of real progress, despite the fact that all sides had frequently claimed that some had been made. The report attempted to explain the Bengalis' broader desire for independence (Schanberg, 1971i). The leaders of five minor groups in Pakistan's National Assembly were mentioned in a single article on page 5 of *NYT* on March 25, 1971, confirming that Yahya and Mujib had reached 'complete agreement' on the constitutional crisis, which would satisfy Mujib's demand for the greatest amount of provincial autonomy in East Pakistan. 'Pakistan has been saved from division and its integrity has been maintained,' stated Mumtaz Daultana, President of the Council Muslim League, in a speech that was also published in the newspaper ("Pakistan's Leaders Reported", 1971). That story also stated that on March 25, 1971, Yahya was scheduled to make a statement. This information demonstrates that by March 24, the opposing parties—Mujib, Yahya, Bhutto, and smaller factions in Pakistan's National Assembly—had come to an understanding.

On March 24, Bhutto affirmed that the agreement would have been anticipated by a meeting of the President's advisers, the AL, and the PPP ("We Are Making", 1971). The same was also affirmed by Rehman Sobhan, one of Mujib's economic advisors. 'There was nothing to prevent formulation of a joint draft of the proclamation for transfer of power anytime from March 25 onwards,' he said in a July 1971 piece published in the *South Asian Review* (Rahman, 2009a). At a Washington Special Action Group meeting on March 26, 1971, CIA's Richard Helms also stated that an agreement was expected on March 24 and that the breakdown might have been caused by Mujib's demand that Martial Law be repealed right away (Smith, 2018). Alamgir Rahman, the general manager of ESSO in East Pakistan, who was close to Mujib and the US Consul General in Dacca Archer K. Blood's primary point of contact with the AL leadership, informed him on March 24 that Mujib had been certain as of the evening of March 23 that he had come to an agreement with Yahya on a solution that would entail:

- a. Immediate establishment of provincial governments;
- b. temporary constitution of the central government under President Yahya;
- c. the subsequent drafting of separate constitutions by East MNAs and West MNAs, with the two constitutions to be subsequently blended into one in a joint meeting and
- d. an understanding that the eventual constitution as well as the interim arrangements would embody a division of power between the center and the provinces so that the center retained only defense, foreign affairs and currency, with foreign trade and aid to be provincial subjects. (Blood, 2002)

Yahya left Dacca on the evening of March 25 after giving the Pakistani army free reign to exterminate all Bengalis, as the leaders of the AL waited for a final meeting to finalise the draft proclamation. Mujib refused to leave the house after receiving a telephone warning that Yahya had left Dacca and that the army was preparing for a crackdown. He told an adviser who managed to avoid arrest, 'If I go into hiding, they will burn the whole of Dacca to find me.' The invasion on Dacca involved an estimated three battalions of troops: infantry, artillery, and

armoured. Operation Searchlight is the well-known operational strategy used to suppress the Bengali nationalist movement. It is possible to conclude from all of these information that Yahya betrayed after coming to a full agreement.

6. Conclusion

The outcome of the 1970 elections and the Bengalis' overwhelming win were so clear-cut that they signalled the end of the civil-military bureaucracy's reactionary politics and encouraged everyone to propose a practical constitution based on provincial autonomy. However, the leaders of West Pakistan were hesitant to cede control to the Bengalis. Mujib was optimistic about a political settlement, which was evident in his speech on March 7, 1971, despite the strong public support for Bangladesh's independence. However, by mid-March 1971, the impasse had reached an unachievable point since it was unable to reconcile East Pakistan's demands with those of West Pakistan, which had effectively been two countries from the start. In this regard, on March 16, 1971, the eagerly anticipated negotiations between Mujib and Yahya began. From March 16 onwards, *NYT* began to report on the progress of the negotiations, including analyses on later issues pertaining to the Pakistan crisis. On March 16, it announced that the drive for independence had become into a strong force.

The role and actions of the military dictatorship in West Pakistan were exposed in many news articles, editorials, comments, and special reports. *NYT* cited a number of issues when describing the history of conflict between the two wings of Pakistan, including the 1000-mile physical distance, the disagreement on provincial autonomy between Mujib and Bhutto-Yahya, the political and economic exploitation of West Pakistan, the federal government's dominance, army-military involvement in politics, and Yahya's postponement of the National Assembly session. In various stories, the newspaper noted that the idea of independence was a powerful motivator for public opinion in the East and that relations between the military leadership and East Pakistanis were progressively deteriorating. Several articles looked at the commonalities between Bengalis in Bangladesh and West Bengal, as well as the popularity of Mujib in the Bengali community. *NYT* depicted the situation of the general populace in addition to the dialogue's progression. It showed that while Punjabis and other West Pakistanis were fleeing Bangladesh in the opposite way, anxious Bengalis were fleeing West Pakistan out of fear of violence.

NYT was hopeful that a solution would be found and stated that it would be challenging but not impossible, despite the fact that neither Mujib nor Yahya reported any progress in resolving or muting the situation. It suggested that the only way out of the impasse would be a loose confederation between the East and the West. The newspaper also verified that Yahya and Mujib had struck a comprehensive deal on the constitutional problem, which would satisfy Mujib's desire for the greatest amount of provincial autonomy in East Pakistan, in reference to other small groupings in Pakistan's National Assembly.

NYT published eighteen distinct pieces about the Bangladesh crisis between March 16 and 25, 1971. In this sense, by elevating Bengali public opinion, *NYT*, an international daily newspaper, served humanity. It supported the Bengali nation's psychological warfare, which was carried out to undermine the enemy's desire to fight and to strengthen and maintain the resolve to free

Bangladesh, by reporting on the daily happenings in Bangladesh and publishing a number of articles.

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