

East Pakistan's Demand of Provincial Autonomy and the Six-Point Program, 1949-1966

Raes Ahmad Talha & Naumana Kiran***

Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore the historical background of East Bengal's (later called East Pakistan) demand for provincial autonomy. It looks into the origin and evolution of the demand for provincial autonomy, which at the final stage, was presented in the form of the Six Points of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It investigates that the said demand was presented for the first time by the leadership of Bengal's Muslim League branch in 1949. Its evolution had observed that during the efforts of constitution-making while debating on the report of the Basic Principles Committee or on the One-Unit Scheme in 1955, East Bengali's political leadership continuously emphasized on maximum provincial autonomy. It was when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's voice was one of the strongest voices for the demand in the House and out of the House even. Further, the provincial election campaign of 1954 also observed the raising of the same demand, which brought success for East Bengal's United Front. The second part of this research paper evaluates Six-Point Formula and also highlights the impact and outcomes of the Six-Point Program, which sought to address provincial autonomy for East Pakistan but was viewed as a threat to the unity and integrity of Pakistan. The study employs an analytical and comparative approach, relying on qualitative research techniques.

Keywords: East Pakistan, provincial autonomy, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, East Bengal, six-points.

Introduction

This article examines the role of East Pakistan's political elite and especially the role of Sheikh Mujib in demanding provincial autonomy for East Pakistan. The article seeks what was the origin of raising the demand for provincial autonomy in East Pakistan, how had this demand been converted into Six Points, how West Pakistan's establishment dealt with Six Points and how these points got support among East Pakistanis.

* Mr. Raes Ahmad Talha, M.Phil. Scholar, Pakistan Study Centre, University of the Punjab.

** Prof. Dr. Naumana Kiran Imran, Professor, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab.

It is a general perception in Pakistan that Six Points were the major force behind the separation of Pakistan and Bengali historians declared those points as the Charter of Freedom or Magna Carta for Bangladesh.¹ The study also reveals whether the six points program had a historical background or whether these points were Mujib's innovation. The study explores that in the early history of Pakistan, numerous challenges and complexities had been emerged related to East Pakistan, which eventually led to its secession from Pakistan in 1971. An essential dimension of the predicament in the context of East Pakistan, apart from the evident divergences in language, culture, and economic disparities, revolved around the demand for increased representation in the Federal legislature, official recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages etc. However, the call of maximum provincial autonomy and fewer powers to the federation was the most significant factor towards separation of East Pakistan. Out of all voices raised for provincial autonomy, Sheikh Mujib's proved to be louder and the most effective one. The paper has been produced on the basis of primary as well as secondary sources. The use of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly's debates and Memoirs of East Bengali leadership has added value to the point, raised in this study.

I. Origin and Evolution of the Demand of Provincial Autonomy, 1949-1965

The initial call for autonomy in East Pakistan originated from the Parliamentary Party of the East Pakistani branch of the ruling Muslim League in 1949. During a meeting held in December of that year, the party resolved to pursue comprehensive autonomy for East Pakistan, retaining control in all areas except Defense and Foreign Affairs.² This demonstrates that from the early days of Pakistan, there existed a prevailing sentiment of confederation between East and West Pakistan and a strong desire for full provincial autonomy among the political elite of East Pakistan. It is a notable fact that the said demand had originally been put forth by the East Pakistan branch of the Muslim League and was also incorporated into Mujib's Six Points, advocating for enhanced Provincial Autonomy.

¹ Shahnawaz Mantoo, 'Sheikh Mujibur Rehman: Founder of Bangladesh'. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9:5 (May 2015), 155.

² Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, ed., *East Pakistan Crisis* (Lahore: Centre for South Asian Studies & Pakistan Study Centre, University of the Punjab, 1997), 1.

Later, either it was debate on reports of the Basic Principles Committee or election campaign of 1954 or even debates in second Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, East Pakistani leadership consistently raised their voices for provincial autonomy.

a. The Debate on Report of the Basic Principles Committee³

The plea for Provincial Autonomy was consistently asserted by the political leadership of East-Pakistan during various instances of political and constitutional deliberations. Similarly, when Pakistan began drafting its constitution, the issue of Provincial Autonomy was once more brought forward by East Pakistani leadership. The interim report⁴ of the Basic Principles Committee (BPC), submitted on 7 October 1950, faced significant criticism, especially from East Pakistan and was withdrawn by November 1950. The most extensive critique of the report emerged, where a considerable number of people were dissatisfied with its content. The primary concerns raised were that the report did not recognize Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan and did not grant sufficient autonomy to the provinces.

Additionally, the report failed to provide East Pakistan with a majority representation based on its population in the legislature, as both Houses were given equal powers. These shortcomings led to discontent and the subsequent withdrawal of the interim report. A leaflet titled 'Will Janab Liaqat Ali Khan answer the following questions?' was also published, and its contents reflected the prominence of the autonomy issue for East Pakistan.⁵ The questions posed in the leaflet provided clear evidence that the demand for autonomy in East Pakistan was a pressing and actively discussed matter of that time.

Meanwhile, the Grand National Convention was held in Dhaka on 4 & 5 November 1950, under A.R. Khan's leadership. The convention presented an alternative constitutional proposal to the BPC report, based on the Lahore Resolution, advocating maximum provincial autonomy, reserving only defence and foreign affairs for the centre.⁶ The proposed model envisioned a United States of Pakistan comprising East and West

³ The Basic Principles Committee (BCP), was formed in 1949 to determine the basic principles for the Constitution of Pakistan.

⁴ Known as the blueprint.

⁵ Rizwan Ullah Kokab, 'Constitution Making in Pakistan and East Bengal's Demand for Provincial Autonomy (1947-58)', *Pakistan Vision*, 12:2 (December 2011), 167.

⁶ Naumana Kiran, 'The Federal Cabinet of Pakistan and Politics of East Bengal/Pakistan, 1947-1958', *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 21:9 (August 2016), 26.

regions, each with its parliament elected through a joint electorate system. Additionally, the proposed Constitution emphasised regional control within central subjects, including separate defence forces and regional foreign offices. It also restricted central taxation to a few agreed-upon items, requiring regional approval for any additions. Furthermore, the draft called for the creation of a sovereign socialist republic of Bengalis, recognising Bengali as a state language.⁷

The resemblance between this proposal and Mujib's Six-Point is evident and shows that the six points were, to a large extent, a reformulation of the constitutional proposal of the Grand National Convention. These events highlight the continuity and persistence of the demand for provincial autonomy in East Pakistan over the years.

On 26 April 1951, the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League (EPAML) issued a strong appeal expressing dissatisfaction with the BPC report. It urged the people to resist the central efforts to control East Pakistan's resources and called for a persistent struggle to achieve complete provincial autonomy.⁸ This appeal reflected the growing political commitment in East Pakistan toward greater self-governance and provincial autonomy.

Alongside demands for autonomy, the Chittagong branch of the Provincial Pakistan Muslim League (PML) proposed a confederation between East and West Pakistan. According to the proposal, each region would manage its revenues and contribute a predetermined amount to the centre for defence, foreign affairs, and currency, with representation in these central departments would be based on its population. This confederation model aimed to strike a balance between regional autonomy and centralised governance, ensuring that each unit had a fair say in central matters while retaining control over its financial resources and administration.⁹

The proposal for a confederation in Pakistan, initiated by East Pakistani leaders in 1953, gained support in Punjab from leaders such as Mian Iftikharuddin, Shaukat Hayat, Maulana Zafar Ali, Begum Shah Nawaz, and Chaudhry Nazir. Three members of the High Court Bar Association, namely Chaudhry Nazir, Mahmud Kasuri, and Sirajuddin Pal, submitted a memorandum to Governor-General Khawaja Nazimuddin, advocating two autonomous states (East and West

⁷ Hassan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 30-31.

⁸ Rizwan Ullah Kokab, *op.cit.*, 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

Pakistan) under a loose confederation to handle defence, inter-zonal communication, and foreign affairs for the entire country.¹⁰ Further, the issue was also raised in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP), Mian Muhammad Iftikharuddin highlighted the concerns and demands related to East Pakistan's autonomy. He advocated a confederal system, allowing each province to manage its internal affairs, while the centre would handle only defence and foreign affairs. His speech emphasised the importance of recognising Pakistan's cultural diversity and preventing dominance as overly unitary, lacking true federalism and called for a fair distribution of seats in the federal legislature to ensure balanced representation at the national level.¹¹

The BPC report and the debate which had been generated on the Report were a strong indication that East Pakistani leadership and intelligentsia had been clear since 1949 about establishing a maximally powerful provincial government in the province.

b. Electoral campaign for the 1954 East Pakistan Provincial Elections

Ahead of the 1954 elections, key East Pakistani leaders, A.K. Fazlul Haq, Maulana Abdul Bhashani, and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, formed an alliance called the United Front (UF) or Jukto Front (JF),¹² initiated on Maulana Bhashani's suggestion. The idea was first proposed during a Pakistan Muslim Awami League (PMAL) Council meeting in May 1953, and the JF was officially established on November 13, 1953. Its 21-point manifesto for the elections was built on the principle of maximum provincial autonomy aimed to challenge the ruling East Pakistan Muslim League. Establishment of parliamentary democracy, measures for the protection of East Pakistan from floods and famines, Bengali as a national language, land reforms, fair distribution of resources between East and West Pakistan, the repeal of discriminatory laws, and the abolition of the zamindari system were the main features of the 21-point program of U.F. The most important and most highlighted plan and point said:

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 171.

¹¹ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly*, Thursday, 22 Oct. 1953. Vol. XV: 11. <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. Accessed on 27 July 2023.

¹² The Jukto or United Front was created in September 1952, the Democratic Youth League and the East Pakistan Communist Party proposed the formation of a United Front to fight the East Pakistan Provincial Muslim League in the provincial elections.

The Lahore Resolution proposed full autonomy of East Bengal leaving defence, foreign affairs and currency under the central government. In the matter of defence, arrangements shall be made to set the headquarters of the army in West Pakistan and the naval headquarters in East Bengal and establish ordnance factories in East Bengal, and transform the Ansar force into a full-fledged militia equipped with arms.¹³

These points reflected the UF's strong commitment to securing autonomy for East Bengal within a united Pakistan. The focus on using Bengali in education, promoting local governance, and implementing economic reforms showed a clear intent to meet the region's unique needs. The UF aimed to strengthen East Bengal's economy, culture and administration, while demanding accountability for past injustices. Most importantly, Central to its vision was the implementation of the Lahore resolution, which called for autonomous Muslim-majority provinces, ensuring that East Bengal enjoyed greater self-rule within the broader framework of Pakistan.

The inaugural general elections in East Pakistan were held from 8-11 March 1954, where the UF gained overwhelming support across the province. Backed by its 21-point manifesto and demand for full provincial autonomy for East Pakistan, the UF secured 223 out of 237 Muslim-reserved seats,¹⁴ while the East Pakistan Muslim League (EPML) faced a resounding defeat. Even Chief Minister Nurul Amin lost to a student leader from the PMAL and forfeited his deposit, along with over fifty other Muslim Leaguers.¹⁵ The Muslim League won only nine out of the 300 seats.¹⁶ These results showed that the public and political leaders in East Pakistan shared a strong commitment to protecting provincial rights. By endorsing the Twenty-One Points, voters express their support for full provincial autonomy and, implicitly, for a

¹³ Richard L. Park, 'East Bengal: Pakistan's Troubled Province', *Far Eastern Survey*, 23:5 (May 1954), 72-73.

¹⁴ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *The Unfinished Memoirs: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975)* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 264.

¹⁵ Nurul Amin was directed by the central government to continue his work as CM of the province. But he not only congratulated Haq Nawaz but also resigned from his post.

¹⁶ Minimum of ten seats were required for the Muslim League to be recognized as a party in the Assembly. The 10th seat was provided by Fazlul Haq Chaudhary who had won as an independent candidate from Chittagong.

confederal structure between East and West Pakistan in line with the Lahore Resolution.¹⁷

Following the Adamji Jute Mill Incident,¹⁸ the JF government was dismissed on 29 May 1954. Despite this, elected representatives in the CAP continued to support the 21-point program voiced their support for the 21-Point Program. In a later CAP session, Sheikh Mujib reaffirmed the Program's importance and urged the Assembly to frame a constitution aligned with its principles, reflecting the ongoing push for provincial autonomy.

I would appeal to my friends, Hon'ble Mr Chundrigar (Law Minister) to frame the Constitution on the basis of the 21-Point Program. If you want to push through the Constitution, you could do so, but if you press this Constitution, then you are playing with fire... We want that Pakistan should be saved from the ruling junta for the poor masses, who have achieved Pakistan after great sacrifices. These people who are now ruling were not 2-anna members in the struggle for Pakistan. They want to destroy Pakistan in the name of Islam. If you frame the Constitution on the basis of the 21-Point Program, we will cooperate with you and we will join you, but if you go against the wishes of the people, we will mobilize opinion not only in East Pakistan but also in West Pakistan against this dictatorial and undemocratic Constitution. If you agree to pass a democratic Constitution, we will help you to pass it within seven days, even within three days, but that Constitution should be on a democratic

¹⁷ An amendment was made to the Lahore Resolution in the Delhi Convention of the Muslim League in 1946. According to this amendment, the demand for two or more Islamic states in the draft Lahore Resolution was changed to one Islamic state. Apart from various politicians, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, the most famous leader of East Pakistan, gave the longest and most effective speech in favour of this amendment. Surprisingly, after the death of Quaid-e-Azam and during the 1954 elections, the United Front rejected this amendment and started demanding two independent states under the leadership of H. S. Suhrawardy and A.K. Fazlul Haque. *The Unfinished Memoire by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, op.cit.*, 57-58.

¹⁸ In May 1954, during the initial period of the JF government, there were violent riots erupted between Bengali and non-Bengali (Bihari) workers at the Adamjee Jute Mills in Narayanganj. In those clashes, many employees of the mill were injured, and even a few were also killed. These riots, later, led to the dissolution of the Ministry of Mujib and Fazlul Haq from East Pakistan.

basis, on the basis of the 21-Point Program, otherwise we will oppose it tooth and nail.¹⁹

The provincial election campaign led by JF on the basis of a 21-point program generally and on the call of provincial autonomy specifically brought a clean sweep for the Party in the 1954 provincial elections. People of East Pakistan had developed a consciousness about the issue as early as 1954. The JF government was dismissed unconstitutionally, but the leadership continuously raised the issue in the CAP. Shaikh Mujib, then, had been found active in the CAP on the issue and addressed it on multiple occasions.

c. Second Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP) and One Unit Scheme

The second CAP was formed on 28 May 1955, and convened its first session on 7 July 1955. Throughout its proceedings, provincial autonomy remained a recurring issue, with Mujib emerging as its most vocal advocate. This Assembly also debated the One Unit Bill, and East Bengali leadership strongly opposed it, continuing their longstanding demand for provincial autonomy. On 2 February 1956, during a session of CAP, Mujib questioned the use of the term 'Province' instead of 'states' for East Bengal and West Pakistan, criticising it as a sign of declining genuine autonomy. He highlighted the federal implications of the term while expressing sorrow over the diminishing of privileges and the symbolic ramifications of the suggested name change.²⁰ Mujib said during his speech:

Why have they (the government) given the name of 'Province' to the two units that we have got in East Bengal and West Pakistan and instead of calling them 'provinces', we want to call them 'states'...

Further, they say that these two provinces will get autonomy - they claim that they are giving provincial autonomy to these two provinces - but nobody is going to accept it in name; We are not getting any autonomy even in name. And that's why they don't like to say that we will be a state... I want to point out that even in a federal system of government, everywhere a province is called a 'State'... You

¹⁹ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly, 1918-1919.* <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 21 January 1956. Accessed on 24 May 2023.

²⁰ The name of East Bengal had been changed to 'East Pakistan' after introduction of One Unit in West Pakistan.

have taken away everything. You did not even give provincial autonomy. Now, also the name you want to take away.²¹

Mujib's statement reflected his clear vision of full provincial autonomy for East Pakistan and a confederal model similar to that of the United States. He strongly argued that the railway system in East Pakistan should be managed independently by the government and not by the central authorities in West Pakistan. He further insisted that the regional head of railways in East Pakistan must be a Bengali, opposing continued administrative control by officials from West Pakistan.²² He also raised his voice for a quota in the military for East Bengal, he said,

You know, Sir (Deputy Speaker), how many Bengalis are in that (Defence) department? Sir, it is a question of regional autonomy. We, the poor Bengalis, want our due share.²³

Further, he discussed regional autonomy for East Bengal as their basic right and defended this demand in the following words:

Now they (the opposition) ask why we want regional autonomy. Sir, is it against Islam also? I do not know when the Fatwah will come from our Maulanas that this is also against Islam.²⁴

One of the most controversial tasks of the CAP was the adoption of the One Unit scheme,²⁵ aimed at unifying West Pakistan and ensuring parity with East Pakistan.²⁶ During the discussion, Mujib strongly opposed the bill, calling for a referendum on the matter²⁷ and questioning

²¹ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly*, <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 2 Feb. 1956. Accessed on 27 April 2023.

²² *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly*, <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 21 January 1956. Accessed on 2 May 2023.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1916.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1917.

²⁵ Under the proposed plan called One Unit, the government aimed to dissolve the existing provinces and merge the Western provinces of the Dominion of Pakistan into a single entity known as West Pakistan.

²⁶ Hamid Khan, *Constitutional and Political History of Pakistan*, 3rd ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 90-91.

²⁷ The way of implementation of the One Unit bill was opposed by AL because it was introduced undemocratically and promulgated by an ordinance. Further, he explained that the matter of the One-Unit bill was never put before the public at any time and only the ruling clique of Sind was in favour of the One-Unit move. (Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*)

the inclusion of Karachi in West Pakistan. He argued that Karachi remained a federal city, and moving the capital was a worse idea. He stated that Pakistan's political system was under the control of an undemocratic bureaucracy that ruled the country from Karachi.²⁸ Despite opposition, the One Unit Bill was passed by all provincial legislatures and approved by the CAP on 30 September 1955, coming into effect on 14 October 1955.²⁹ The plan ultimately aimed to centralise power under the central government, reducing provincial autonomy.

Under the one-unit scheme, parity was introduced by granting equal representation to East and West Pakistan in the National Assembly, negating East Pakistan's numerical majority.³⁰

Mujib argued that the Centre should only retain Defence, Foreign Affairs and currency, while all other matters should be delegated to provinces. He emphasised that this distribution would not weaken, but strengthen the central government, countering fears of decentralisation. Highlighting East Bengal's continuous struggle for regional autonomy, Mujib cited declining revenue contributions from East Bengal from 25% to 14% warning that this trend would economically ruin the region by 1960. Mujib said,

Sir, with Defence, Foreign Affairs and Currency, the Central Government can be a strong Central Government. Sir, I am not going into details. I am only referring to it. Our friends say that with the three subjects, it will be a weak Centre, but Sir, we can prove that it will be a strong Centre. Sir, why are the people of East Bengal for the last eight years fighting for regional autonomy? Sir, unfortunately, there is no more time at my disposal, but if you permit me, I can show you what injustice they have done to the people of East Bengal. Sir, according to Mr Gurmani, East Bengal used to pay 25 per cent of revenues to the Central Government. They say that it later decreased to 20 per cent, and now it is only 14 per cent. This is what they say. So, it is decreasing day by day.

²⁸ 'Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly and National Assembly', <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 25 Aug. 1955. Accessed on 27 April 2023.

²⁹ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 92-93.

³⁰ Farooq Adil, 'One Unit: 'Alaqaiyat Kay Khatmy' Kay Naam Per Kia Gaya Faisla Jo Aaj Bhi Pakistan Ko Paryshan Kar Raha Hai (One Unit: A decision made in the name of 'territorialization' which is still troubling Pakistan)', *BBC Urdu*, 7 July 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-57733446>. Accessed on 27 July 2023.

According to this decrease, Sir, in 1960 it will be nil. East Bengal is so ruined.³¹

Further, during the first session of the second CAP and before the emergence of One Unit, an agreement was signed by the East and West Pakistan political elite known as Murree agreement. It was signed on four major conditions: Regional autonomy, Parity in representation, a Joint Electorate and Bengali and Urdu as state languages.³² It is important to note that regional autonomy was one of the core objectives of the Murree Pact, and East Pakistan's political elite supported parity conditionally.

H.S. Suhrawardy played a pivotal role in the formation of the Murree pact and skillfully convinced the people of East Bengal to relinquish their majority and accept the principle of parity at the centre, despite the apparent unfairness on paper. East Bengal, constituting 56 per cent of Pakistan's population, held a clear majority, making it challenging for the Bengalis to accept parity.³³ The formula of parity in the legislature was unanimously accepted with the condition that parity would be extended to all other areas, including defence and administrative services, between the two regions. This meant that while East Bengal agreed to parity in the legislature, it expected a balanced distribution of power and resources across all sectors to ensure fair representation and equal opportunities for both regions within Pakistan.³⁴ Although during this period East Pakistan compromised on the principle of parity and gave up six per cent of its share of seats for the betterment of the country, and actively participated in institution building. But they didn't compromise on provincial autonomy, and the compromise on parity was also conditional on provincial autonomy and equal share in every field of government.³⁵

³¹ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly*, 1917. <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 21 January 1956. Accessed on 2 May 2023.

³² Rizwan Ullah Kokab, *op.cit.*, 177.

³³ Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with a Brief Account of His Life and Work*, ed. Mohammad H. R. Talukdar (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61.

³⁴ Neeti Nair, *Hurt Sentiments: Secularism and Belonging in South Asia* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2023), 182.

³⁵ Farooq Adil stated in his article that Suhrawardy used to say: 'Since the establishment of Pakistan till today (until the establishment of one unit) we have not been given a legitimate share in power, now we are getting half share, so why not accept it.'

On an occasion in CAP, while criticising the government, Mujibur Rahman asserted the unequal treatment between West and East Pakistan, criticising the ruling junta for suppressing voices. He emphasised East Pakistan's political awareness, differentiating those who could not backtrack on regional autonomy from potential betrayers. He said:

Sir, there are two hands to the body of Pakistan. One is West Pakistan and the other is East Pakistan. They are making one hand strong and the other hand weak. Sir, this policy is wrong and will ruin the country. In the Central Government Services, those who form 56 per cent population are not getting 5 per cent share. The East Bengal people are educated, but they are not getting their share. Sir, we do not blame the West Pakistan people. In fact, we want autonomy for them also. If East Pakistan gets autonomy, the West Pakistan people will also get autonomy. We blame the ruling junta. These jagirdars, zamindars, these big landlords and the ruling junta of West Pakistan have suppressed the peoples' opinion in West Pakistan. They are so much suppressed, they cannot cry, they cannot demand, but the people of East Pakistan are politically conscious. They challenge anybody and everybody. They challenge Mr Fazlul Haq, Mr Suhrawardy, and Moulana Bhashani; they challenge their leaders. They tell their leaders 'You have done this wrong and we will not vote for you', but they have been suppressed, persecuted and they have been economically ruined. They have no land; no shelter. But, Sir, we have nothing against the people of West Pakistan, but against the ruling junta, who have entered the Constituent Assembly through the backdoor...

They (members of CAP from East Pakistan other than J.F) cannot go back because they are going against the demand of full regional autonomy, which is the demand of the people... We have been elected by the people on the basis of the 21-Point Program, on the basis of regional autonomy. They can betray, but we cannot.³⁶

Another controversial aspect of the One Unit Scheme was the renaming of East Bengal to East Pakistan. Many East Pakistani

³⁶ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and National Assembly*, 1918. <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 21 January 1956. Accessed on 2 May 2023.

politicians perceived this move as an erosion of Bengal's distinct cultural and historical identity. In the CAP, Mujib strongly opposed the renaming and argued that the name 'Bengal' carried deep historical, cultural and linguistic significance. He suggested that if any change was to be made, it should be subject to a referendum among the people of East Bengal, rather than being imposed unilaterally in the name of national unification.³⁷ He further asserted that key issues such as provincial autonomy, the status of Bengali as a state language, and the debate over joint versus separate electorates should be resolved alongside discussions on the One Unit plan. Reflecting this stance, the working committee of the AL decided that its members would resign from the Legislative Assembly if provincial autonomy was not granted to East Pakistan.³⁸ However, a major linguistic demand was soon fulfilled when, on 29 February 1956, Bengali was adopted as one of the state languages of Pakistan, alongside Urdu, just before the enactment of the country's first constitution.³⁹

The 1956 draft of the constitution exhibited increased provincial autonomy by significantly reducing the number of items in the Federal Legislative List to 30 and expanding the Provincial List to 94, with 19 items placed on the Concurrent List. However, it also granted enhanced powers to the president compared to earlier versions.⁴⁰ Despite opposition from the AL and some other parties in East Pakistan, the draft was passed on 29 February 1956, leading to the declaration of Pakistan as the Islamic Republic on 23 March 1956. It is worth mentioning that when Suhrawardy became Prime Minister in 1956, He admitted the Constitution guaranteed provincial autonomy up to 98 per cent.⁴¹

However, some politicians from East Pakistan criticised the constitution, and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani was the most prominent of them. Within two months of the Constitution's passage, Bhashani revived the call for regional autonomy and joint electorates. He also criticised the central government for the food scarcity in East Pakistan. To draw public attention to the issue, he began a hunger strike

³⁷ *Debates of Pakistan Constituent Assembly and National Assembly*, <https://na.gov.pk/en/debates.php>. 25 Aug. 1955. Accessed on 27 April 2023.

³⁸ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *op.cit.*, XIX.

³⁹ 'From East Bengal to Bangladesh: a timeline,' *Dawn*, 18 December 2011. <https://www.dawn.com/news/681434/from-east-bengal-to-bangladesh-a-timeline>. Retrieved 25 May 2023.

⁴⁰ Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, 'Short-Changing Provincial Autonomy', *Dawn*, 25 July 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1704832>. Retrieved 27 July 2023.

⁴¹ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 94.

on 2 May, demanding a direct allocation of 500 million rupees in foreign exchange to import food grains for East Pakistan.⁴²

It is important to note East Pakistani political elite tried to get more and more provincial autonomy during this whole period. They supported the One Unit Scheme conditionally with more Provincial Autonomy, and they raised their voices for their demand for more provincial autonomy in CAP from time to time.

d. Military Regime and 1964 Presidential Elections

The concept of provincial autonomy and the broader federal structure of Pakistan suffered a severe setback on 8 October 1958, when General Ayub Khan abrogated the 1956 constitution and imposed martial law. This act led to the dissolution of the central and provincial governments, the dismissal of all three legislative bodies, and the banning of political parties, politicians and political activities. The imposition of martial law marked a pivotal moment in Pakistan's constitutional history, effectively centralising power under military rule and weakening the foundational principles of federalism.

The damage to federalism was further compounded with the promulgation of the 1962 Constitution, which consolidated most powers in the hands of the President, thereby marginalising the role of provinces.⁴³ General Ayub Khan introduced this new constitution on 1st March 1962, and formally became President of Pakistan after lifting martial law on 8 June 1962. Although the ban on political parties was lifted on 16 July 1962, through the Political Parties Act, the political landscape remained under tight control. Ayub's supporters organised under the Convention Muslim League, with Ayub himself assuming the role of its President on 24 December 1963.⁴⁴

In preparation for the January 1965 Presidential election, five major opposition parties formed the Combined Opposition Parties (COP) on 21 July 1964, in Dhaka. Despite ideological differences, the alliance reflected a unified opposition to Ayub Khan's authoritarian rule. COP decided to field joint candidates for the Presidency and legislative

⁴² M. Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1947-1958*, vol. 1 (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 2002), 304.

⁴³ Ahmed Bilal Mehboob, 'Short-Changing Provincial Autonomy', *Dawn*, 25 July 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1704832>. Retrieved 27 July 2023.

⁴⁴ Akhtar Hussain, 'Politics of Combined Opposition Parties (COP) During Ayub Khan Era (1958-1969),' *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, 31:1 (January-June 2018), 12.

assemblies, and on September 19, Miss Fatima Jinnah was unanimously chosen as their presidential candidate.⁴⁵

On 24 July, COP introduced a nine-point program, calling for fundamental reforms: restoration of basic rights, direct elections through adult franchise, and a federal parliamentary system ensuring provincial autonomy. Other demands included limiting presidential powers, establishing an independent judiciary, lifting bans on political parties, releasing political prisoners, and repealing repressive laws. Economic justice featured prominently, with proposals to reduce disparities between East and West Pakistan, expand opportunities, and ensure equitable wealth distribution. The program also advocated effective refugee resettlement, flood control, and minority rights, particularly in religious and cultural freedoms. Foreign policy goals included resolving the Kashmir issue per UN resolutions, adopting an independent foreign policy, and reinforcing Islamic values through constitutional reforms, including amendments to the Family Laws Ordinance. This comprehensive platform, drafted by Chaudhry Mohammad Ali of the Nizam-i-Islam Party, represented a carefully negotiated consensus among opposition forces.⁴⁶

The COP's nine-point program emphasised provincial autonomy, advocating for basic rights, full representation, a federal parliamentary system, and equitable resources distribution. Its focus on decentralisation reflected the enduring importance of autonomy in Pakistan's political dynamics. Notably, these points showed that East Pakistan's demand for provincial autonomy was not isolated and had broad support, including from key political figures and parties from West Pakistan.

II. Six-Points Formula of Mujib and Question for Provincial Autonomy

Ayub Khan's government maintained strong control over provincial matters until 1966, keeping East Pakistan relatively quiet politically. However, the situation changed when Mujib's six points gained popularity, alarming the government due to their potential for promoting secession of East Pakistan. Consequently, the government had to address the situation.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sharif al-Mujahid, 'Pakistan's First Presidential Elections', *Asian Survey*, 5:6 (January 1965), 283.

⁴⁶ Akhtar Hussain, *op.cit.*, 12.

⁴⁷ Naumana Kiran Imran, *The Federal Cabinet of Pakistan: Formation and Working, 1947-1977*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 163-164.

It is important to note that Six Points were raised for the first time at a national political forum during a conference in Lahore on 5-6 February 1966, convened to build consensus on the Tashkent Declaration. The Declaration, widely viewed as a humiliating concession to India, sparked public outrage. Even Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Foreign Minister, resigned in protest. In this atmosphere of mistrust and political dissatisfaction, West Pakistani opposition leaders sought to unite parties from both wings to pressure the government, accusing it of losing militarily at the negotiation table. The Lahore conference brought together opposition parties from across the country, but its agenda became overshadowed by debates over the Tashkent Agreement.⁴⁸

The Lahore meeting was backed by several political groups, with prominent leaders on its subject committee,⁴⁹ including Chaudhry Muhammad Ali (Head of Nizam-e-Islam), Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan (Head of Awami League of West Pakistan), Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi (Amir of Jamaat-e-Islami), Maulvi Farid Ahmad, Sardar Shaukat Hayat, Maulana Abdul Sattar Khan Niazi, Yahya Bakhtiar, Khwaja Muhammad Rafiq and General Azam Khan. These groups maintained their separate identities throughout the conference.

However, the invitation extended to the East Pakistanis was declined by most, except for a small group led by Mujib. The National Awami Party (NAP) categorically refused to participate, claiming that they were never invited in the first place. Both Nurul Amin's National Democratic Front (NDF) and the NAP boycotted the conference as well. Due to the absence of these parties, it was expected that the convention would reach a consensus on a common agenda. However, this was not the case.⁵⁰

Sheikh Mujib, as General Secretary of the Pakistan Awami League, arrived in Lahore on 4 February 1966, along with other AL members, to attend the national conference. On 5 February, he submitted his Six Points proposal to the subject committee and requested that it be included in the conference agenda for the next day's conference. When Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, President of Pakistan AL, asked for Mujib's stance on the Tashkent Declaration, Mujib replied that he couldn't

⁴⁸ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 175.

⁴⁹ The subject committee of the conference was appointed to determine the agenda of the meeting and prepare the conference resolutions and joint declaration. They could also decide not to make the proposals in the draft part of the agenda or final documents but simply consider them.

⁵⁰ Farooq Adil, 'Sheikh Mujib Kay (Sheikh Mujib's Six Points...)' *BBC Urdu*, 26 Sep. 2020.

comment without party consultation. Nasrullah sarcastically noted that Mujib could present the Six Points without consulting the party, but couldn't speak on Tashkent.⁵¹

This shows that Mujib neither had a problem with the Tashkent Declaration nor did he value the central leadership of the AL, but he practically made himself separated from the central leadership of the AL even before the conference was held. Unfortunately, his proposal was rejected by the subject committee and was never discussed at the conference. As a result, on February 6th, Mujib decided to boycott the conference altogether and returned to Dhaka. He said in a statement, after his return,

‘My proposals have been hindered by a group of opposition leaders who have refused to support them’.⁵² Furthermore, the members of the East Pakistan AL delegation did not participate in the conference because it was unwilling to address the six-point agenda. He also claimed that he agreed to participate in the National Conference on the condition that his suggestions would be considered, but he was misled. Regarding the Tashkent Declaration he said, ‘We cannot condemn the accord outright because we believe in world peace and the settlement of all disputes with our neighbour peacefully’.⁵³

This was the first time it became publicly known that Sheikh Mujib's document, submitted to the subject committee of the National Conference, consisted of six points.⁵⁴ He also released the full text of the Six Points, declaring them essential for the survival and prosperity of East Pakistan. The following is the text of the Six Points:

1. The Constitution should provide for a Federation of Pakistan in its true sense based on the Lahore Resolution, and the parliamentary form of government with supremacy of a Legislature directly elected based on universal adult franchise and direct voting.
2. The federal government should deal with only two subjects: Defence and Foreign Affairs, and all other residual subjects should be vested in the federating states.
3. Regarding currency either of the following:

⁵¹ Altaf Hassan Qureshi, *6 Nukat Ki Sachchi Tasveer* (Lahore: Maktab-i-Urdu Digest, 1969), 62.

⁵² Among others, Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan (the main leader of his party) was included in this group.

⁵³ ‘SIX-POINT PROGRAM’, *Morning News*, 12 February 1966.

⁵⁴ After the separation of East Pakistan, Bengali historians depicted the six-point program as the ‘Charter of freedom of the Bengali nation’, although Mujib never give such a statement about the six-point program.

- (a) Two separate, but freely convertible currencies for the two wings should be introduced; or
 - (b) If this is not feasible, there should be one currency for the whole country, but effective constitutional provisions should be introduced to stop the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan.
 - (c) Furthermore, a separate reserve bank should be established and separate fiscal and monetary policy be adopted for East Pakistan.
4. Taxation: The power of taxation and revenue collection should be vested in the federating units and the federal centre would have no such power. The federation would be entitled to a share in the state taxes to meet its expenditures.
 5. Foreign Trade:
 - (a) There should be two separate accounts for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings; and
 - (b) the foreign exchange requirements of the federal government should be met by the two wings equally or in a ratio to be fixed;
 - (c) Indigenous products should move free of duty between the two wings, and
 - (d) The constitution should empower the units to establish trade links with foreign countries.
 6. East Pakistan should have a separate military or paramilitary force, and the Navy headquarters should be in East Pakistan.⁵⁵

The original draft of Mujib's program contained four points, but he later added two more, demanding a separate militia and control over foreign exchange for East Pakistan.⁵⁶ On 20-22 February 1966, Mujib convened a meeting of the Awami League Working Committee at his residence, where only eight members were present. The Six-Point Program was approved, even though the party president, Sahibzada Nasrullah Khan, was not informed.⁵⁷

During the February Lahore Conference, it was decided that opposition leaders would visit East Pakistan to inform the public about the negative implications of the Six-Point Program. A six-member committee was formed, including Chaudhry Muhammad Ali, Maulana Maududi, Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, Syed Muhammad Afzal, and M. Anwar Advocate. Soon after, Maulana Maududi began a 12-day tour of East Pakistan, while Nasrullah Khan and others were arrested by Ayub's

⁵⁵ 'SIX-POINT PROGRAM', Morning News, 12 February 1966.

⁵⁶ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 179-80.

⁵⁷ Altaf Hassan Qureshi, *op.cit.*, 64.

government, a move that surprised many, given their opposition to the Six Points.⁵⁸

Mujib's Six-Point proposal was rejected not only by West Pakistani politicians but also by non-Awami League leaders from East Pakistan. Key figures such as Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, President of the All-Pakistan AL, along with the National Awami Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Nizam-i-Islam, opposed it. Maulana Maududi, a subject committee member and Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, warned during a speech in Dhaka that Mujib's plan would weaken and ultimately disintegrate Pakistan.⁵⁹ East Pakistan Council Muslim League chief M. Shafiqul Islam said in Dhaka, 'If Sheikh Mujib's six points are accepted, it will create chaos and instability in the country'.⁶⁰

Mr Abdul Hye Chowdhury, East Pakistan Minister of Law and Parliamentary Affairs condemned the program and said, 'statements of Mujib suggesting a confederation of East and West Pakistan and this could be the first step towards the disintegration of the country'.⁶¹ Mr Bhutto, the Foreign Minister of Ayub, challenged Mujib to a public debate on the Six Points.⁶²

Despite this opposition from political figures, the movement garnered support from the majority of the population in East Pakistan. In response, Mujib defended his Six Points, when he was addressing a public meeting at Laldighi Maidan, He said:

The Six Points program did not aim at weakening and disintegrating Pakistan. He regretted that his program was believed wrongly interpreted by some leaders. Further, he said that his program was not only to safeguard the interests of East Pakistan but also of the whole of Pakistan.⁶³

In response to Bhutto, Mujib demanded a nationwide referendum on the Six Points but intensified his campaign by sharply criticising both current and former holders of power.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Ayub Khan's government, using the Defence Rules of Pakistan, banned the publication of speeches from the conference and public gatherings. However, after several days, some newspapers reported key points.⁶⁵ Ayub Khan made

⁵⁸ Farooq Adil, *op.cit.*

⁵⁹ 'Mujib's Program Will Disintegrate Pakistan', *Morning News*, 19 February 1966.

⁶⁰ Farooq Adil, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ 'Hye Slates Mujib,' *Dawn*, 15 Feb. 1966.

⁶² Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 180.

⁶³ 'Mujib defends his 6-point', *Pakistan Observer*, 27th February 1966.

⁶⁴ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 180.

⁶⁵ Farooq Adil, *op.cit.*

several visits to East Pakistan to counter the growing support for the Six Points. He offered import licenses and funds and directed East Pakistani ministers to publicly promote the government's stance. Despite these efforts, the campaign failed to curb the demand, and support for the Six Points continued to grow.⁶⁶

Notably, some opposition politicians also supported some points of Mujib's program during the National Conference, e.g., Former PM Chaudhry Muhammad Ali emphasised the need for East Pakistan's self-sufficiency in defence. Abdul Baqi Baloch called for the establishment of arms factories in East Pakistan and criticised the army's recruitment criteria, suggesting that being of shorter stature should not be a barrier to recruitment. Abul Kalam Muhammad Yusuf, Amir of Jamaat-e-Islami East Pakistan, called for a military academy in the region and proposed military training for madrassa students.⁶⁷

Concerns were also raised about the origins of the Six-Point Program. Some believed it was not Mujib's idea but was suggested by Ayub Khan's Information Secretary, Altaf Gohar, to divide the opposition. Others credited Bengali bureaucrat Rahman Subhan and economist Nazrul Islam for shaping the plan.⁶⁸

On 19 March 1966, Mujib was elected President of the Awami League and launched a province-wide campaign for the Six Points.⁶⁹ He extensively travelled across the province for this purpose. He was arrested in Jessore on 18 April under the Defence of Pakistan Rules but released on bail.⁷⁰ On 23 April, Mujib was arrested again on a non-bailable warrant under the Defence of Pakistan Rules and the East Pakistan Safety Ordinance. He was removed to Sylhet, conveniently distant from Dhaka, by train. Along the way, he addressed crowds at various train stations.⁷¹

During his campaign, Mujib was repeatedly arrested in Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Dhaka—eight times in the first quarter of the year alone. His trial began on 7 May in Sylhet Jail on charges of sedition. The next day, 8 May, he was arrested again after speaking at a Narayanganj rally. In protest, the Awami League organised a strike on 7 June demanding the release of Mujib and other political prisoners. This

⁶⁶ Imran, *The Federal Cabinet of Pakistan: Formation and Working, 1947-1977*, 163-64.

⁶⁷ Farooq Adil, *op.cit.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Mujib Elected E. Wing AL Chief', *Dawn*, 20th March 1966.

⁷⁰ 'Mujib Arrested and Bailed Out', *Dawn*, 19th April 1966.

⁷¹ Hamid Khan, *op.cit.*, 180.

marked the beginning of Mujib's two-year journey through various prisons, ending in a military cantonment.⁷²

The six-point program, which was later declared as Charter of Freedom or Magna Carta by Bengali Historians, was not an unresolvable or uncompromised issue.⁷³ Had the Six Points been merely accepted or rejected at the National Conference in Lahore, they would likely have shared the fate of other resolutions—briefly discussed, reported in newspapers, and soon forgotten. However, Mujib intended to use these demands as a strategic bargaining tool to address the issues faced by East Pakistan. He was not rigid in his stance and expressed willingness to compromise on these points, as he later admitted in an interview with Altaf Hasan Qureshi. He said:

Mr Qureshi, you are not an economist, neither I nor Mr Sulaiman! We have a few issues we would like to resolve. A committee of economists may be constituted for this purpose, two members from East Pakistan and two from West Pakistan. Whatever decision this committee takes will be acceptable to us.

... I sincerely say that the six points are not Quran and Bible, I presented them for political compromise, but some newspapers and some leaders presented them differently. Political compromise through dialogue and negotiation is not impossible.⁷⁴

Initially, the Six Points failed to gain significant traction, even within East Pakistan, as many of its political leaders rejected them. However, the situation shifted dramatically when the military regime in West Pakistan launched a severe crackdown on opposition leaders and denounced the Six Points as treasonous. These repressive measures inadvertently fueled public sympathy for Mujib and elevated both his stature and the appeal of his program. By the time of the 1970 general elections, Mujib had made the Six Points the cornerstone of his campaign. The overwhelming public support transformed his previously flexible stance into a firm, non-negotiable position.

⁷² Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *op.cit.*, XXI.

⁷³ Shahnawaz Mantoo, 'Sheikh Mujibur Rehman: Founder of Bangladesh'. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9:5 (May 2015), 155.

⁷⁴ Altaf Hassan Qureshi, *Mulaqatain Kya Kya: Aham Shakhshiyat Kay Jeety Jagty Interviews* (What are the meetings) (Lahore: Jamhoori Publications, 2016), 104.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the demand for provincial autonomy in East Bengal emerged immediately after the formation of Pakistan. While the Muslim League amended the Lahore Resolution at the Delhi Convention in 1946 to promote national unity—a move strongly supported by Bengal—the people and politicians of East Bengal consistently sought meaningful autonomy within a federal structure. Their demands were first articulated in 1949 through the Bengal Muslim League and were reiterated during the constitution-making process and in subsequent provincial elections.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six Points represented a renewed articulation of the longstanding demands for provincial autonomy, previously voiced at the Grand National Convention in 1950 and reaffirmed in the Murree Declaration of 1953. However, one of the key factors behind the greater acceptance of the Six Points was the political vacuum left by the deaths of prominent pro-Pakistan Bengali leaders, Fazlul Haq and Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy. This void allowed Mujib to rise without facing significant ideological opposition within East Pakistan. The Six Points gradually gained popularity, particularly in response to the repressive actions of the federal government, such as the repeated arrests of Mujib and ultimately his implication in the Agartala Conspiracy case. The people of East Pakistan thought that since Mujib had given six points to protect their rights, he was being punished by the central government. The next major reason for the popularity of the demand was the successful election campaign of the Awami League in the first general elections of Pakistan in 1970. Mujib was very lenient about those points in the beginning, and he stated on many occasions that these points were a bargaining chip from the Awami League and could be discussed in a democratic way. But before the 1970 elections, Mujib ran his election campaign on these points for about a year. And after winning the elections in 1970, there was no way for him to amend or relax these points because of the pressure from the people of East Pakistan. The journey of the provincial autonomy, which had been started by the Muslim League leadership of East Bengal, had been taken to its destination by Mujibur Raman.