'Cyclone Not Above Politics' [1]: East Pakistan, disaster politics, and the 1970 Bhola Cyclone*

SRAVANI BISWAS [ID]

Earth Observatory of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University
Email: sbiswas@ntu.edu.sg

PATRICK DALY

Earth Observatory of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

On 12 November 1970, the Bhola Cyclone swept across the southern districts of East Pakistan, killing over 300,000 people. Small islands were swept away and dead bodies of humans and cattle lay strewn across the devastated landscape. Following the news of the destruction, journalists, students, artists, and political workers rushed to the affected area with basic relief supplies, without waiting for the Military Law Administration (MLA) to intervene. The cyclone's occurrence just three weeks prior to the first general elections in Pakistan added a new dimension to the already simmering political crisis. The extensive media coverage of the disaster brought the pitiful state of infrastructural development and lack of governance in East Pakistan under local and global scrutiny. The cyclone and the corresponding issues soon became embroiled within the larger political demand for regional autonomy. The MLA came under attack from sections of East Pakistan's politicians, press, and public, as well as international political actors, for its poor disaster governance. This article uses the Bhola Cyclone of 1970 as the lens to explore the complex interconnections between environmental disasters and a key issue of governance. While the Bhola Cyclone has been a subject of recent discussions, this article uses

[1] Staff correspondent, 'Cyclone Not Above Politics', *The Pakistan Times*, 19 November 1970.

a disaster-politics analytical framework to understand the disaster's role in the subsequent political turbulence and the emergence of Bangladesh.

Introduction

There is a broad consensus in the academic literature that the 1970 Bhola Cyclone[2] played *some* role in the political dynamics leading to the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh.[3] Scholars have

---

[2] On 12 November 1970, the Bhola Cyclone hit the coast of East Pakistan, impacting areas that are now part of Bangladesh. Winds of over 200 kilometres per hour and a storm surge up to 10 metres high inundated over 4,000 square kilometres (1,700 square miles), causing massive damage to agricultural land and the built environment. Millions of people were affected and made homeless, and estimates of the death toll range between 200,000 and 500,000 people. See Edris Alam and Dale Dominey-Howes, 'Review: A New Catalogue of Tropical Cyclones in the Northern Bay of Bengal and the Distribution and Effects of Selected Landfalling Events in Bangladesh', *International Journal of Climatology* 35 (2015), 824. By any criteria, the Bhola Cyclone was one of the worst disasters of the twentieth century. As the newspapers reported, the wind speed at Barisal, Bhola, and Patuakhali registered 120 miles per hour while, in the Sundarban forests in Khulna district, it was recorded to be between 60 and 70 miles per hour; at the scattered silt islands under Chittagong district, it was between 40 and 50 miles per hour. The storm produced winds of 241 kilometres per hour (149 miles per hour). A huge mass of water 10 metres high accompanied the cyclone. For details, see Gazi Md. Khalil, 'Cyclones and Storm Surges in Bangladesh: Some Mitigative Measures', *Natural Hazards* 6 (1992), 12. The high tides, too, made the situation worse. In the cyclone-affected area, mortality ranged from 4.7 per cent to 46.3 per cent within the villages and the casualty figure was estimated to be 300,000. It was found that the mortality rate among children below the age of ten was highest. Men in the age group of 15–49 years had the highest survival rate, while women and the elderly registered higher mortality rates across the districts. For details on the post-cyclone demography, see Alfred Sommer and Wiley H. Mosley, 'East Bengal Cyclone of November, 1970: Epidemiological Approach to Disaster Assessment', *The Lancet*, Saturday 13 May 1972, p. 1031.

[3] Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), p. 23. According to Eric Griffel, Provincial AID Mission director, the cyclone was the real reason for the secession. See also Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 2013), 121. The MLA's foot-dragging was difficult to explain but some of the plausible explanations that the Americans came up with to explain the lack of coordination included President Yahya Khan's possible underestimation of the extent of the destruction; to discount any future allegations for interference with the democratic processes in East Pakistan in the wake of the elections; and the fear of overreacting to the crisis as in case of the floods in August earlier in the year leading to the postponement of the elections.

argued that the event was at least partially responsible for the extent of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (SMR)'s Awami League (AL)'s landslide victory in the first democratic election in Pakistan, held just three weeks after the cyclone. The subsequent refusal of the West Pakistan-based military junta (MLA) to allow AL to form a government was one of the factors that led to the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.[4] Prior to the cyclone, SMR and AL were expected to do well, but their margin of victory exceeded expectations.[5] While, undeniably, the disaster's occurrence close to Pakistan's first general elections increased its presence in the political arena, it is difficult to quantify the impact of the cyclone upon final vote totals.

Specific arguments about why the disaster factored into the political situation cite governor of East Pakistan, Vice-Admiral S. M. Ahsan's lack of judgement for the Pakistani army's delayed mobilization—a move that caused the MLA international embarrassment.[6] Others have argued from a developmentalist perspective that the military junta's reluctance to develop a comprehensive programme in East Pakistan for disaster mitigation and management—which could have lessened the loss caused by the cyclone—was a prime example of a pattern of

---

[4] Muhammad Rizwan, 'The Elections 1970: From Ballot to Nowhere', *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 3, no. 4 (November 2014), 28. The author's perspective is too simplistic. The cyclone cannot alone be responsible for effecting the Awami League's landslide victory. It followed a succession of events that made the political effects far-reaching. And this was a long-drawn-out process that had witnessed the gradual integration of different sections of East Pakistani society since the anti-Ayub movement in 1968. With the masses mobilized, subsequent events including the cyclone became part of the nationalist struggle. The absence of the MLA's intervention after the cyclone was not a figment of the imagination. It was accepted by the president himself at the Dacca press conference. For more details on the president's press conference, see Sydney H. Schanberg, 'Yahya Concedes "Slips" in Relief but He Defends Government against Charges', *Special to The New York Times*, 28 November 1970, http://search.proquest.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/119005370/8442527C8D1433EPQ/13?accountid=14214 [accessed 20 August 2020]. Naomi Hossain, 'The Bhola Cyclone, Nationalist Politics, and the Subsistence Crisis Contract in Bangladesh', *Disasters* 42, no. 1 (version of record online: April 2017), 189–190.

[5] Foreign and Commonwealth Office Documents (FCO) FCO 37/684.

[6] Major General (Retd.) Khadim Hussain Raja, *A Stranger in My Own Country: East Pakistan, 1969–1971* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 36–39. The author was the general officer commanding 14 Division in East Pakistan and blamed General Ahsan, East Pakistan's governor, and the bureaucrats for not seeking the Pakistani army's help after the cyclone. The military administration was left embarrassed as international attention mounted prior to its resource mobilization in the affected districts, as did the news of its delayed interventions.

strategic long-term neglect of East Pakistan and justified the need for a political alternative more in tune with the needs of the people in East Pakistan.[7] Although the literature on the history of Bangladesh discusses the calamity and draws general inferences about the cyclone's role in the general elections and in East Pakistan's secession, most of this research lacks a formal framework for evaluating how much we should credit the 1970 cyclone for the political turbulence and the secession that followed.

There has been extensive discussion by disaster scholars about the political impact of disasters and post-disaster responses, which provides a useful theoretical context for studying the political implications of the Bhola Cyclone.[8] It is widely accepted that disasters can serve as arenas for change.[9] Pre-disaster institutions, practices, and assumptions are challenged and post-disaster rebuilding provides tempting 'opportunities' to enact transformation as stakeholders push to use the rupture caused by the disaster and the resultant expenditures to rebuild to shape new post-disaster realities.[10] Other lines of research show how disasters can dissolve pre-disaster social and political status and open up

[7] Hossain, 'The Bhola Cyclone', pp. 189–190.

[8] Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill, 'Disaster Politics: Tipping Points for Change in the Adaptation of Socio-political Regimes', *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 1 (2010), 21–37.

[9] P. Daly, R. M. Feener, M. Jauhola, and C. Thorburn, 'Blueprints for Change in Post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia', in P. Daly and R. M. Feener (eds) *Rebuilding Asia Following Natural Disasters: Approaches to Reconstruction in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 181–209.

[10] There have been a number of important contributions over the past two decades to the disaster literature about how the 'disasters as opportunity' paradigm has been used by myriad actors to press for vast transformations in post-disaster economic systems, the built environment, and social and religious institutions. For some influential book discussions about these subjects, please see Andrea Davies, *Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); David Edgington, *Reconstructing Kobe: The Geography of Crisis and Opportunity* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); J. C. Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Roberto Barrios, *Governing Affect: Neoliberalism and Disaster Reconstruction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Robert Olshansky and Laurie Johnson, *Clear as Mud: Planning for the Rebuilding of New Orleans* (Chicago: American Planning Association Press, 2010); Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); and Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2008); R. Michael Feener, *Shari´a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 251–252. The Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 paved the way for the re-establishment of the Islamic legal system in Aceh. See also Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 'Introduction'. As the author

spaces for the emergence of new actors within the political sphere and the construction of new forms of social contracts.[11]

Pelling and Dill propose several ways in which disasters can impact politics and provide a model for evaluating the impact of disasters upon political systems.[12] According to them, a disaster can be a 'critical juncture' where political change occurs through contestation and after a 'tipping point' has been reached.[13] In this view, ruptures caused by the disaster within the political and social spheres contribute to a distinctive break in the pre-disaster political trajectory, allowing the emergence of new political actors, forms of political rhetoric, and policies. This model results in a break and a major transformation of the pre-disaster political situation. Alternatively, they propose that disasters (and disaster management) can be used by governments and other actors to assert authority and reinforce the power and roles of the state.[14] Pelling and Dill refer to this as an 'accelerated status quo', in which 'change is path dependent and limited to a concentration or speeding up of pre-disaster trajectories which remain under the control of powerful elites both before and after an event'.[15] In this article, we use Pelling and Dill's framework[16] for analysing the relationship between disasters and political change to see whether we can more precisely determine the role that the Bhola Cyclone played in the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation state. We test the hypothesis that the cyclone was a critical juncture that led to the creation of an independent Bangladesh.

To test this, we structure our analysis of historical data related to the cyclone and political context obtained from declassified administrative documents, internatonal and vernacular newspaper reports, and archival materials based upon Pelling and Dill's model.[17] Their model proposes a cycle that starts with the historical/political context prior to the disaster to show how a disaster fits within a longer trajectory of development and power dynamics. In the second section, we provide a

---

demonstrates, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake provided the opportunity for the Chinese Communist Party to introduce the state-development plan in the affected areas.

[11] The classic work that introduced this subject is Anthony Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City: Death and Rebirth in the Andes* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

[12] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster Politics', pp. 21–22.

[13] Ibid., p. 22.

[14] See Edward Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013); see also Sorace, *Shaken Authority*.

[15] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster Politics', p. 22.

[16] Ibid., p. 29.

[17] Ibid.

detailed discussion about the main political actors, policies, and political discourse in East and West Pakistan before the cyclone to establish the pre-disaster political momentum and trajectory. Following a disaster, their model then sees the potential for change shaped by the 'increased attention on development failures and asymmetry in the social contract' that occurs after a disaster—meaning the extent to which authorities are seen as effectively (or not) managing the crisis.[18] In the third section, we discuss in detail how the MLA's preparation for and management of the cyclone fed into long-standing narratives of neglect toward East Pakistan and emphasized the asymmetry of the power dynamic between West and East Pakistan. Their model then assesses how state and non-state actors mobilize, respond to the disaster, and 'champion, direct, counter, or capture evolving critical discourses'.[19] This asks whether the post-disaster situation supports the consolidation of pre-disaster power or allows the empowerment and/or emergence of new political actors. In the fourth section, we map out how state and non-state actors in both West and East Pakistan mobilized and reacted to the 1970 cyclone and show how prominent political actors seized on the disaster to emphasize political grievances. Pelling and Dill propose that the accumulation of the above factors can feed into a 'renegotiation of human security' during which discourse about pre- and post-disaster politics becomes institutionalized—potentially leading to different forms of technical, policy, and political change.[20] In our discussion, we return to the core question of whether the disaster led to a fundamental change (or renegotiation) in pre-disaster political dynamics and therefore can be credited as a critical juncture that triggered a major political transformation that reshaped South Asia.

Understanding the politics: the rise of Bengali nationalism

It is essential to acknowledge that the path to East Pakistan's secession from West Pakistan and Bangladesh's independence started long before the cyclone and was marred by tensions over a range of complex issues. The creation of a separatist Muslim nation of Pakistan was based on the principle of regional autonomy laid out in the Lahore Resolution of 1940, referred to

[18] Ibid., p. 27.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

as the 'Magna Carta of the people of Pakistan'.[21] Initially, following the end of British rule, for the vast majority of Bengali Muslims in East Bengal, '"Pakistan" meant that the colonial experience of non-participatory, non-democratic, non-representative politics, was over'.[22] However, the political aspirations of the nascent Bengali Muslim middle class in East Bengal were dampened as political power passed from the hands of erstwhile Hindu landlords to the West Pakistan-dominated elites. Soon, middle-class Muslims in East Bengal realized 'that the Bengali politicians of the ruling party were nothing but servitors of the West Pakistan based Muslim League leadership and the central government'.[23] The problematic political relationship among the different interest groups within Pakistan and the inability on the part of the central leadership to address or mitigate the growing schism alienated the Bengalis in the eastern province.[24] Thus, while 'Pakistan' embodied the ideal of the simultaneous existence of national sovereignty but with 'full and complete' autonomy in the two regional units, in reality, the relationship between the two units was fraught from the start.[25] Ideological schism is

---

[21] Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, '6-Point Formula: Our Right to Live (March 23rd 1966)', in Sheelendra Singh et al., *Bangladesh Documents*, Vol. 1 (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1999), p. 25.

[22] Ahmed Kamal, *State Against the Nation: The Decline of Muslim League in Pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947–54* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2009), p. 13.

[23] Badruddin Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh: Class Struggles in East Pakistan (1947–1958)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 15. The political events in Pakistan since the 1950s widened the schism. The dissolution of the United Front government in East Bengal following the 1954 elections and the proclamation of the One-Unit in 1956 as an attempt to 'unify' the provinces in West Pakistan were a strategy to institutionalize political discrimination against East Pakistan. See Tariq Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1970), p. 68. After One-Unit, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan. Within a decade of partition, the army seized power in a *coup d'état* and installed a military dictatorship (MLA) on 7 October 1958. President Iskander Mirza abrogated power to the then-army Commander-in Chief General Ayub Khan. The military-bureaucratic establishment seized power to prevent the general elections scheduled in March 1959. General Ayub Khan's decade-long rule (1958–69) ended with his resignation in 1969 following three months of student uprisings in both East and West Pakistan. See Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 14–15. To understand the difference in nature of the military regimes of 1958 and 1969, see Ali, *Pakistan*, pp. 15–23.

[24] Rahman Sobhan, 'Economic Basis of Bengali Nationalism', in R. Sobhan (ed.) *Collected Works of Rehman Sobhan: Milestones to Bangladesh*, Vol. 2 (Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2007), p. 148.

[25] Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Fifty Years of Politics* (a political autobiography written in Bengali), reprint of 10th edn (Dacca: Khoshroz Kitab Mahal, 2010), pp. 497–500.

often cited as the driving force behind the realization of Bengali nationalism. It is informed by two broad trajectories—the inevitable and the disparity theses.

The proponents of the inevitable thesis emphasize that the unique geographical arrangement, linguistic and other cultural differences, and ethnic biases led to the final secession of East Pakistan.[26] On the surface, Islam was the predominant justification for creating a 'cohesive' Muslim nation, but shared faith failed to overcome the vast and administratively awkward geographic separation between West Pakistan and East Pakistan (positioned on either side of India) or the sociocultural and ethnic differences among its disparate citizens.[27] For the Muslim elite at the helm of power in West Pakistan, the vision of Pakistan represented 'safeguarding and strengthening' Islamic heritage.[28] Linguistic politics began to mar the relationship between the units starting less than a year after Pakistan's independence. Quaid-i- Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's decision in 1948 to forcibly establish Urdu as the *lingua franca* of Pakistan and dismiss the demands of the eastern wing's students to recognize Bengali as a state language set in motion the discriminatory politics that culminated in the Language Movement of 1952.[29] Bengali nationalism emerged in the 1950s around the secular linguistic symbol but, as scholars underscore, this was 'a nationalist ideology without a mass movement'.[30]

The disparity thesis drew attention to the uneven infrastructural development and also to the systematic exploitation of East Pakistan.[31] In 23 years of shared nationhood, the eastern province was systematically impoverished and economically stripped—effectively a 'colony' supplying

[26] Philip Oldenberg, '"A Place Insufficiently Imagined": Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985), 712–713. See also Raghavan, *1971*, pp. 8–10. Raghavan dismisses the existing literature that treated secession as the inevitable outcome, rather pointing out that the creation of Bangladesh was the 'product of conjuncture and contingency, chance and choice' (ibid., p. 8). His work situates the Bangladesh Liberation War in the global context.

[27] Nasir Islam, 'Islam and National Identity: The Case of Pakistan and Bangladesh', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 1 (February 1981), 57–59.

[28] Oldenberg, 'A Place Insufficiently Imagined', pp. 712–713.

[29] Rangalal Sen, '*Bhasha Andolan o Dhaka Bishwavidalaya* [Language Movement and Dhaka University]' (in Bengali), in *Bangladesher Muktijuddho: Dhaka o Kolikata Vishwavidyalayar Abodan [Liberation War of Bangladesh: Contribution of Dhaka and Calcutta University]* (in Bengali), reprint of 2nd edn (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2012), pp. 148–149. See also Oldenberg, 'A Place Insufficiently Imagined', pp. 716–718.

[30] Islam, 'Islam and National Identity', p. 64.

[31] Badruddin Umar, 'Politics and Parties in Pakistan (1947–58)', *Pakistan Observer*, 19 and 27 December 1968, in *Society and Politics in East Pakistan*, 2nd print (Dhaka: Shrabon Prokashani, 2011), pp. 9–18.

raw materials to West Pakistan and acting as a market for its finished products.[32] East Pakistan's jute-dependent economy received a setback due to the systematic reduction of jute prices and the exploitation of peasants at the hands of *jotedars* (landlords).[33] East Bengal became the chief supplier of raw materials to West Pakistan, which included timber, along with spices and other commodities.[34] Despite East Pakistan earning 60–70 per cent of Pakistan's foreign exchange through the export of raw and manufactured jute, the lion's share of the income was invested in West Pakistan projects.[35] The disparity between the economic growths in the two wings of Pakistan intensified during the First Five Years Plan (1955–60) and the Second Five Years Plan (1960–65).[36] This disparity led to what is described as 'a classic case of rising expectation and rising frustration'.[37] The absence of Bengal's representatives in the decision-making bodies of Pakistan led to further alienation.[38]

---

[32] 'Bengalees Shall Not Be Allowed to Turn Slaves: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Speech at Dumni (Tejgaon) on October 20, 1970', *The People*, Dacca, 21 October 1970.

[33] Ali Riaz, '"God Willing": The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23, no. 1&2 (2003), 306.

[34] P. C. Verma, 'Aftermath of Stagnation', *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, 11 March 1972, p. 580. See also Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* third edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2015) for a comprehensive discussion of the economic disparity and systematic exploitation of East Pakistani economy.

[35] Rahman Sobhan, 'The Problem of Regional Imbalance in the Economic Development of Pakistan', *Asian Survey* 2, no. 5 (1962), 34.

[36] Ibid., pp. 34–35.

[37] Rounaq Jahan, 'Ten Years of Ayub Khan and the Problem of National Integration', *Journal of Comparative Administration* 2, no. 3 (November 1970), 294–295. While redressal of economic disparity between the two units was a major goal for the military junta, the investment policies implemented were inadequate. In the following years, development was touted as an important factor towards consolidating its power. However, as Jahan pointed out, discontentment against the junta was palpable in East Pakistan in the form of the increasing number of riots.

[38] Ibid., pp. 279–280. The author refers to the Pakistan army in the period of 1947–69 as being less national due to the absence of East Pakistan's regiments. She attributes this lack of representation to the factionalism perpetuated by the military regime. For details on the recruitment and military factionalism along with Indian involvement in the war, see also Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For a discussion on the consolidation of power in the hands of elites and military-bureaucratic groups based in West Pakistan and alienation of Bengalis from the decision-making bodies, see Robert Laporte, *Power and Privilege: Influence and Decision-making in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976).

The politics of exclusion and the economic inequality, along with the widening gap between Pakistani bureaucratic-military state and Bengali politics, made the situation worse.[39] In late 1968, ten years after the military coup, President Ayub Khan's 'decade of development'[40] faced serious challenges on both domestic and international fronts. The Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 escalated the crisis and discontent among people in both the provinces worsened against the state-controlled press, the uncertain economic conditions, corruption, and concentration of wealth in the hands of few.[41] In 1968, led by students in both the provinces, a popular movement spread from Rawalpindi in West Pakistan to East Pakistan that was forced to 'adopt unconstitutional and revolutionary methods for correcting imbalance in the country's body politic'.[42] What had begun with demands for reforms escalated into a full-scale movement resulting in the end of the regime.[43] The subsequent abrogation of the Constitution adopted in 1962, the dissolution of President Ayub Khan's basic democracy tenets, and imposition of martial law by General Yahya Khan indicated the weakened condition of the military establishment.[44] On 26 March 1969, General Yahya Khan, the commander-in-chief of the army, took over and, on 29 November, the new MLA chief announced Pakistan's general elections would be held on 5 October 1970 and that West Pakistan was to be 'dis-integrated' into separate provinces.[45]

Prior to the Bhola Cyclone, the East Pakistan political landscape was largely shaped by two men: Moulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (SMR). The Muslim AL was co-founded by Moulana Bhashani and H. S. Suhrawardy on 23 June 1949.[46] At the time of the Language Movement in 1952, Bhashani warned the West Pakistani

[39] Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 185–187.

[40] Wayne Wilcox, 'Pakistan in 1969: Once Again at the Starting Point', *Asian Survey* 10, no. 2 (February 1970), 77.

[41] Wayne Wilcox, 'Pakistan: A Decade of Ayub', *Asian Survey* 9, no. 2 (February 1969), 88–92.

[42] Badruddin Umar, 'Political Development of West Pakistan', in *Society and Politics in East Pakistan* (Dhaka: Shrabon Prokashani, 2011), p. 25.

[43] Rehman Sobhan, 'The Economic Causes of the Current Crisis', in R. Sobhan (ed.) *Collected Works of Rehman Sobhan: Milestones to Bangladesh*, Vol. 2 (Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2007), p. 33.

[44] Wilcox, 'Pakistan', p. 89.

[45] Wilcox, 'Pakistan in 1969', pp. 76–79.

[46] M. Rashiduzzaman, 'The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan', *Asian Survey* 10, no. 7 (July 1970), 575.

leadership against the imposition of Urdu and demanded independence for the Bengali-speaking population. In 1958, Bhashani broke away from the AL and formed the National Awami Party (NAP) that promoted leftist politics and a strong rhetoric for the separation of East Pakistan. NAP's ideology was firmly rooted 'in favor of class liberation of the Bengali working class and the peasantry' and included communist elements.[47]

East Pakistan's politics in the 1960s was dominated by SMR, who was elected president of the Awami League in 1963. In 1966, SMR proposed his Six Points platform to provide a clear political agenda. The core of the Six Points platform was a prescription for political and economic autonomy for East Pakistan. Although it represented the fundamental ideological contradiction embedded in the conceptualization of Pakistan as a federalist state versus a unitarist state,[48] the demand for autonomy in the Six Points Program was not new.[49] It was fundamentally opposed to the One-Unit concept developed in 1955 and in effect during the Ayub era and promoted by the MLA. In specific terms, the Six Points Program called for creating a parliamentary government within a federalist state for all of Pakistan in which the central government retained control of only defence and foreign affairs. Other demands included: separate currencies (or measures to prevent the flight of capital from the east to the west); separate monetary policies for the provinces; fixed provision of revenues to the central government; separate external trade accounts; and militias or paramilitary forces.[50] The focus on provincial autonomy was in part to bring East Pakistan up to speed with its western counterpart and to

[47] Peter Custers, 'Moulana Bhashani: Historical and Contemporary Significance', in Anisuzzaman Choudhury (ed.) *Maulana Bhashani: Leader of the Toiling Masses* (New York: Maulana Bhashani Foundation, 2012), pp. 115–126.

[48] The concept was explicitly discussed as an important part of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's election manifesto; '6-Point Formula', pp. 24–25. See also David Ludden, 'The Politics of Independence in Bangladesh', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 35 (August–September, 2011), 81. See also Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Fifty Years of Politics* to get a comprehensive account of the political struggle for Pakistan from the pre-partition period until the emergence of Bangladesh.

[49] Regional autonomy was a prominent feature in the Twenty-one Points during the 1954 elections as well as the Eleven Points during the Student Movement of 1969. Broadly, the Eleven Points incorporated most of the Six Points Demands.

[50] Cyril Pickard, 'After the Elections in Pakistan: The British High Commissioner in Pakistan to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs', henceforth FCO 37/684. For details, see Rahman, '6-Point Formula', pp. 23–33.

ensure 'unity in diversity and union without over-centralization'.[51] This was seen as an important mechanism to end the political and economic exploitation of East Pakistan and to allow local control over economic development. Importantly, however, SMR's platform stopped short of calling for independence for East Pakistan.

The mass movement of 1969 in East Pakistan was characterized as a 'moment of truth' in its ability to radicalize East Pakistani society under the aegis of able regional leaders, thus taking advantage of the political protest against the Ayub Khan regime.[52] Moulana Bhashani once again took to the streets, protested against the regime, and supported the historic Eleven Points demands put forward by the student protesters.[53] His time-tested protest strategies of *gherao* (forceful encirclement of officials) and *hartal* (strike) became popular methods of protest during the movement. His presence facilitated the incorporation and participation of peasants and industrial workers in the subsequent movements.

The elections were initially scheduled for 5 October 1970, but the MLA postponed it to 7 December 1970 because of heavy floods in July–August in East Pakistan. The government machinery, the MLA cited, which was to implement important functions prior to the elections, was engaged in relief work.[54] The MLA's decision to postpone elections from October to December without consulting the political parties was not met with opposition.[55] However, the AL leader issued a statement to foreground that the postponement 'would not affect his party's position', but warned against further attempts to disrupt elections.[56]

While President Yahya Khan's military administration expressed a willingness to transfer power to a democratically elected government, in reality, it was less inclined to relinquish its control over politics.[57] The new MLA chief time and again touted his commitment to restore democracy in Pakistan. Despite having declared in an interview that 'They [East Pakistanis] are going to have democracy whether they like

---

[51] Ibid., p. 25.

[52] Ibid., p. 29.

[53] Eleven Points incorporated SMR's Six Points Programme and included workers and students' demands as well. See Ali, *Pakistan*, 'Appendix'.

[54] 'Elections Shifted to December Decision Due to Floods', *The Dawn*, 16 August 1970.

[55] 'Bengal's Disaster Coast', *The Times*, 16 November 1970, p. 9.

[56] 'Shifting of Polls Date Won't Affect Awami League: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Statement near Dacca', *Pakistan Observer*, 21 August 1970.

[57] Raghavan, *1971*, 'Preface'. The president could not believe the election outcome—the fact that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won a landslide victory was unprecedented for the president.

it or not',[58] rumours suggested the president and his advisers were posed against it.[59] In a secret memorandum, dated 16 September 1970, to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the defence adviser in the British High Commission at Rawalpindi expected the army 'to hold a position of decisive influence' as political violence escalated in the run-up to the elections.[60] In fact, it was widely held that 'any political party in power must have the full support of the Army or they [the army] will continue to run things themselves'.[61]

At the time of the general elections of 1970, SMR and the AL were posed as the popular choice to win and SMR was hailed covertly by both the United States of America and the United Kingdom as East Pakistan's undisputed political leader. The MLA too was acutely aware of his growing political clout in the eastern wing following his acquittal from the Agartala Conspiracy Case in 1969 amidst overwhelming public protest. However, the MLA did not seem to accept the possibility that SMR could muster enough support to take control of the Pakistan government.[62] The stage was set for one of the parties to be proven wrong.

In the two decades leading up to the cyclone, the political relationship between West and East Pakistan was strained, with the majority Bengali-speaking population in East Pakistan frustrated by exploitation and neglect by the MLA, and demanding more autonomy over local affairs. The position of the West Pakistan elite, led by the MLA, is complicated and in some ways suffered from a major internal contradiction. There was clear rhetoric about democracy and allowing the elections to determine how power was shared between both units. However, it is clear that West Pakistan and the military would not accept any threats to the territorial integrity of Pakistan and had a limited appetite for genuine power sharing with East Pakistan. In 1970, the political situation was tense, volatile, and highly uncertain. Then, three weeks before the election was scheduled to be held, the cyclone hit.

[58] Peter Hazelhurst, 'They Are Going to Have Democracy Whether They Like It or Not', FCO 37/684.

[59] Blood, *Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, Governor Ahsan confided in Blood that the army was stalling the elections to thwart Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's chances of victory. See also FCO 37/684.

[60] Major M. P. Lee, 'Pakistan—the Army in Politics', FCO 37/683.

[61] 'Disturbances in Multan', FCO 37/684.

[62] Raghavan, *1971*, 'Preface'.

Attention to development failures and asymmetrical relations

As discussed in the previous section, many within East Pakistan had long been discontented by the imbalanced allocation of resources and the perception that West Pakistan neglected and exploited East Pakistan. In this section, we examine the MLA's actions prior to and immediately after the cyclone. We show that the MLA was widely criticized both in East Pakistan and internationally for its failure to adequately prepare for the cyclone (disaster mitigation), its reluctance to declare a national emergency, and its 'lack of urgency' in relief distribution (disaster management). We argue that this fell within a long pattern of neglect for East Pakistan and became a major source of frustration in East Pakistan after the cyclone that most likely factored into the emotions and politics surrounding the elections.

Existing protective measures

The Bhola Cyclone's massive casualty figure drew attention to the uneven state of infrastructure development in East Pakistan. In a relatively less destructive cyclone in 1960 in East Pakistan, the military regime's active intervention led to the formulation of the Emergency Standing Orders in 1961 and 1962, respectively.[63] Issued by the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, these orders gave detailed directives to officers in charge at every level for relief distribution to minimize delay at such times of exigency.[64] After the 1960 cyclone, Gordon Dunn, a specialist from the National Hurricane Center in Miami, was brought in to advise the government on cyclone-mitigation efforts and he identified a warning service in isolated areas as a difficult problem.[65] Construction of embankments and cyclone shelters were recommended as protective measures in rural areas where evacuation would be challenging to

---

[63] Blood, *Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, p. 120.

[64] Government of East Pakistan: Home Department, *Emergency Standing Orders for Cyclones* (Dacca: East Pakistan Governmental Press, 1961), p. 21.

[65] Walter Sullivan, 'Disaster: East Pakistan: Cyclone May Be Worst Catastrophe of Century', *NYT*, 22 November 1970. The newspaper reported the expert's recommendations included cyclone shelters on raised earth or sanctuary platforms in the low sea-facing areas and instalment of radar stations in the littoral districts. Following the Bhola Cyclone, domestic and international newspapers highlighted the breakdown of the radar station and inadequate number of sanctuary platforms.

mitigate damage and loss of life in future storms.[66] However, eye-witness accounts after the Bhola Cyclone reported the absence of cyclone shelters and in some cases *pucca* (concrete) houses of affluent villagers acted as impromptu shelters for the survivors.[67] The Cyclone Emergency Standing Orders assigned duties to officials within a strict hierarchy and specifically warned against entrusting disaster aid in the hands of private individuals.[68] In another official *Cyclone Code* released in July 1970, emphasis was laid on the Meteorological Department's warning system and precautionary measures to be adopted by different departments and agencies to reduce time to distribute relief.[69] There is, however, no evidence to suggest any activity on the recommendations.

Heavy floods in July 1970 exposed the ineffectiveness of the hyped Flood Action Plan (FAP) in East Pakistan. Flood control was a serious demand and featured prominently in the Eleven Points Program and the FAP received substantial media attention. In reality, as the 1970 floods demonstrated, the project did not receive the allocated funds from the government and frustrations mounted over the 'paper promises and bureaucratic bungling'.[70] Even the international media were apprehensive of popular backlash against the MLA's repeated neglect of long-term disaster-mitigation interventions towards floods and cyclones.[71]

In late October 1970, following the heavy rains and cyclone that killed 300 people in Dhaka and the coastal districts, *Purbadesh* reported the damaged radar station at Patenga, Chittagong to caution the authorities. At the time of the Bhola Cyclone, the unrepaired weather

---

[66] Fazlul Bari Choudhury, 'All Quiet on the Southern Front', *Sunday Pakistan Observer*, 29 November 1970, p. 11; Gordon E. Dunn, 'The Tropical Cyclone Problem in East Pakistan', *Monthly Weather Review*, March 1962, pp. 86–87.

[67] Interview records from the survivors in Char Kukri Mukri conducted by the author during fieldwork in March 2012.

[68] Government of East Pakistan: Home Department, *Emergency Standing Orders for Cyclones*, p. 21. On paper, this committee was directed to meet periodically to evaluate the availability of funds and to review resource availability for reconstruction and rehabilitation at times of life-threatening events.

[69] Government of East Pakistan: Relief and Rehabilitation Department, *Cyclone Code* (Dacca: East Pakistan Governmental Press,1970), 'Preface'.

[70] Rehman Sobhan, 'Waging War against Floods', *Forum*, 8 August 1970.

[71] 'Bengal's Disaster Coast', *The Times*, 16 November 1970, p. 9, http://find.galegroup.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=nysl_ce_syr&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS151221104&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0 [accessed 20 August 2020].

station failed to record the cyclone even when it was close to the coast.[72] Newspapers like *Pakistan Observer* and *Purbadesh* insisted that the NESC (National Environmental Satellite Center) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Washington, DC warned the Pakistan government of the impending cyclone several days before the cyclone actually made its landfall in Bhola.[73] In East Pakistan, Muhammad Samiullah, director of the Pakistan Meteorological Department, claimed that the danger-level warning issued by the government was 'accurate'.[74] However, multiple sources reported that, prior to the Bhola Cyclone, Pakistan's Meteorological Department failed to issue adequate warnings as well as accurate danger-level signals to inhabitants in the coastal districts. In most cases, coastal residents were not informed of the impending danger and were unable to save their cattle.[75] Given the remote terrain and unavailability of a mass-communication medium, systematic evacuation was out of the question.[76] The department's delay in information dissemination perplexed the press and public, given its previous records. One such newspaper report observed several discrepancies in relation to the warning signals. It pointed out:

People were not, as on previous occasions asked to take shelter in community centers, *pucca* [concrete] schools or other places comparatively safe. And that the Radio changed its traditional system and did not give the danger signal number that usually accompanies storm warnings and indicates how serious the storm is going to be. The usual procedure of announcing a warning by beat of drum in the cyclone zone was also not reportedly followed.[77]

[72] *Purbadesh*, 12 November 1970, p. 1.

[73] *Pakistan Observer*, 24 November 1970.

[74] 'Weather Prophet Says *Warning* Was Accurate', *The Pakistan Observer*, 23 November 1970. In late October 1970, following the heavy rains and cyclone that killed 300 people in Dhaka and the coastal districts, *Purbadesh* had reported the damaged radar station at Patenga, Chittagong to caution the authorities. At the time of the Bhola Cyclone, the unrepaired weather station failed to record the cyclone even when it was close to the coast. *Purbadesh*, 12 November 1970, p. 1.

[75] Interview record of a male survivor in Bhola Sadar in March 2012.

[76] The inadequate number of cyclone shelters also exacerbated the problem. During the fieldwork in the district in 2012, people claimed they did not leave their homes because of the misleading signals on the danger levels.

[77] Choudhury, 'All Quiet on the Southern Front', p. 11.

Response and disaster management

Almost immediately after the cyclone, the MLA was strongly criticized for its perceived lack of urgency and response. On 14 November, two days after the cyclone, Bhashani urged the military regime to declare a state of emergency.[78] However, the military administration resisted, despite additional and repeated demands for a declaration of national emergency from sections of East Pakistani society and international parties.[79] This was followed by extensive criticism of the MLA's failure to provide emergency relief. Ten days after the cyclone, international aid workers reported that the government response in remote areas including Manpura, Hatiya, and Chittagong was 'still non-existent'.[80] Twelve days after the cyclone, published newspaper photographs and reports showed relief goods piled up at the Lahore airport awaiting distribution.[81] Around 129 bales of clothes and blankets allocated for survivors were left stranded.[82] Helicopters required for the airdrop of relief materials were not sanctioned by the administration. The junta's refusal to allocate more helicopters despite the East Pakistani governor's urgent request was termed by leading politicians as 'shocking'.[83] At the time of the 1970 cyclone, the status of the governor's Emergency Relief Fund or its mobilization was unclear. In some cases, especially at the subdivisional and the union levels in affected areas, officers were unable to distribute relief materials due to a

[78] 'Declare State of Emergency: Bhashani', *The Morning News*, 15 November 1970. The news also featured other newspapers, for example, 'In Demand for Emergency', *Dainik Sangbad* (Bengali), 15 November 1970.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Cornelia Rohde, *Catalyst: In the Wake of the Great Bhola Cyclone* (Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), pp. 80–81. Alongside Fazle Hasan Abed (founder of BRAC) and Father R. W. Timm, Rohde accompanied her husband, Dr Jon Rohde, and other members at the Cholera Research Laboratory (CLR), USAID, Ford Foundation to organize relief work in Manpura and Hatiya through HELP (Hatiya Emergency Lifesaving Project). HELP was described by Rohde as 'a joint humanitarian response by concerned people of diverse nationalities with strong working partnership between Bengalis and foreigners' (pp. 204–205). See also, Rev. Father R. W. Timm, *Forty Years in Bangladesh: Memoirs of Father Timm* (Dhaka: Caritas Bangladesh, 1995), p. 137, where the acronym 'HELP' stood for Heartland Emergency Lifesaving Project.

[81] Staff Correspondent, 'Relief Goods Pile Up in Lahore', *The Pakistan Observer*, 25 November 1970.

[82] Ibid.

[83] 'Wali Khan's Call Get Down to Relief Work', *The Pakistan Observer*, 25 November 1970.

severe shortage of manpower.[84] From newspaper reports and eye-witness accounts, it is clear that there were extensive delays in delivering relief and some disaster-affected areas did not receive any relief. There were instances of survivors protesting against the delayed disaster aid.[85]

Staunch criticism on the military regime's mishandling of disaster aid also came from its political allies: the governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom.[86] The classified correspondence among the various governmental aides in the Nixon administration and the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office substantiated the charges of neglect brought by East Pakistani political leaders, press, and the public. On several occasions, officials from the respective governments expressed indignation at the military administration's lack of transparency and accountability. The American consul general in Dhaka, Archer Blood, relief officer Eric Griffel, journalists Walter Sullivan and Sydney Schanberg, and others who witnessed the cyclone's devastation first-hand were appalled at the government's apathy.[87] The Pakistani military junta's lackadaisical approach frustrated high level officials like Henry Kissinger, who did not want the administration to be seen to be 'supporting a loser'.[88] The United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, too, felt frustrated with the Pakistani military regime's 'lack of urgency'.[89] To avoid political antagonisms, the US and UK government officials were compelled to turn a blind eye publicly to the MLA's disaster response. However, their confidential letters and reports belied their 'official' political correctness and reveal their discomfort with MLA's response to the cyclone.

To make matters worse for the junta, the international community's rapid mobilization of emergency humanitarian assistance made the MLA's muted response even more conspicuous.[90] On 18 November

---

[84] Personal interview of former reporter from *Sangbad* in Bhola Sadar. Bhola Sadar, which is located in the northern part of the then-subdivision (Bhola became a fully fledged district in 1983), was comparatively less affected by the calamity. The morning after the calamity (13 November 1970), on visiting the subdivisional office, the officer in charge requested him to organize a relief party to distribute aid among those stranded in adjoining villages.

[85] 'Survivors Protest Rally against Delay in Relief in Char Bata' (report in Bengali), *Sangbad*, 19 November 1970.

[86] FCO 37/684.

[87] Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, p. 23.

[88] Ibid.

[89] FCO 37/684.

[90] Ibid.

1970, the Shahanshah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi appealed to his citizens for a generous *zakat* (Islamic almsgiving) to help survivors in East Pakistan.[91] To minimize the delay in relief reaching Dhaka, the shah ordered safe air passage between Tehran and Dacca.[92] Also, he pledged support until the survivors received adequate relief and were rehabilitated effectively.[93] A resolution for generous contributions for emergency relief for East Pakistan was passed by 42 countries in the UN General Assembly. The resolution compelled the General Assembly to declare the 'present contingency arrangements were inadequate for relief in calamities of major magnitude'.[94]

A large international relief operation was undertaken and warships, helicopters, and aircraft were mobilized by the governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, West Germany, Belgium, Turkey, and Switzerland.[95] The aid collected by the Red Cross from 16 countries amounted to £200,000.[96] Aid was even offered by India, Pakistan's arch rival, but the junta refused to accept the 50 mobile hospitals for cyclone-affected districts.[97] Given the international response and expedited mobilization of disaster aid for the cyclone survivors, the military junta's approach towards the survivors in front of the international community was termed as 'gross neglect, callous inattention and utter indifference'.[98] Agencies like CARE (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere) severed ties with the Pakistani

[91] 'Iran's Shah Declares East Pakistan's Disaster as National Emergency' (in Bengali), *Dainik Sangbad*, 19 November 1970.

[92] 'National Disaster for Iran', *The Pakistan Times*, 18 November 1970.

[93] 'Reported Rejection by Pakistan of India's Offer of Mobile Hospitals etc. for Relief Operations in the Cyclone-Affected Areas of East Pakistan', *Parliamentary Debates Rajya Sabha Official Report* LXXIV, no. 14 (New Delhi: Rajya Sabha Secretariat), p. 41.

[94] 'Half the Disaster's Survivors May Die of Starvation, Typhoid or Cholera', *The Times*, 19 November 1970, p. 1, http://find.galegroup.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=nysl_ce_syr&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS17527667&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0 [accessed 20 August 2020].

[95] *Parliamentary Debates Rajya Sabha Official Report* LXXIV, p. 41.

[96] '£200,000 for Pakistan Flood Victims', *The Times*, 17 November 1970, p. 1, http://find.galegroup.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=nysl_ce_syr&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS18183025&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0 [accessed 20 August 2020].

[97] Ibid.

[98] 'East Pakistani Leaders Assail Yahya on Cyclone Relief', *New York Times*, 24 November 1970, p. 5.

government due to lack of coordination.[99] Soon, other international aid organizations followed suit. The Pakistan Red Cross Society and Save-the-Children stopped working with the military authorities and decided to function independently.[100] The failures of the MLA to effectively distribute relief were widely reported by local and international media.[101]

Somewhat belatedly, the MLA took a series of measures to counter these charges of ineptitude. The president had visited East Pakistan on 14 November 1970 on his way back from a state visit to China.[102] Although he stayed for a couple of days in Dhaka before reaching Rawalpindi on 17 November 1970, his first visit was marred by controversy. East Pakistan's press and political parties termed this brief controversial visit as 'apathetic'[103] and a petition signed by 11 East Pakistani politicians was sent to the president to request his presence in the province at the time of the crisis.[104] The media reported his being in an inebriated state during the aerial survey.[105] General Yahya Khan visited Dhaka soon after and flew to the southern districts to oversee relief efforts and discuss rehabilitation measures.

In response to mounting pressures, the president made a second visit to East Pakistan on 23 November 1970. At a press conference on 27 November, the president clarified the administration's position on several of the charges brought against the government's response to the cyclone. The MLA chief countered the charges of the delay in relief distribution. Yet, it was at this press conference that the president was forced to accept the 'slips' and 'mistakes' in the MLA's relief efforts after the disaster.[106] Responding to questions on SMR's demand for regional autonomy following the cyclone, the president stated his full support for maximum autonomy so that the people of the province had

[99] 'Co-ordination Lacking: CARE Stops Its Supplies', *The Pakistan Times*, 24 November 1970.

[100] Ibid.

[101] This led the MLA to crack down on media and issue a veiled threat to expel 'antipathetic elements' among British journalists if they did not stop 'misreporting' and interfering in Pakistan's domestic affairs. FCO37/684.

[102] *Dainik Ittefaq*, 18 November 1970.

[103] 'East Pakistani Leaders Assail Yahya on Cyclone Relief', *New York Times*, 24 November 1970.

[104] Ibid. See also 'Report in Bengali', *Purbadesh*, 24 November 1970.

[105] Raghavan, *1971*, pp. 14–15.

[106] Schanberg, 'Yahya Concedes "Slips"', p. 10.

in effect 'full charge of their destiny, planning and utilization of its resources within the concept of Pakistan'.[107]

Commenting on the East–West growing schism and the prospect of eventual secession, the president denied and dismissed these allegations as the normal emotional response of East Pakistanis.[108] Despite the president's repeated assurances of effective post-disaster interventions, areas in Bhola remained without food after 15 days and contaminated water made a cholera epidemic imminent.[109] In response to a question from a journalist on whether timely deployment of the Pakistani navy would have saved lives, the president once again denied allegations of ineptitude and stated: 'I hope they [Awami League] come to power and do better. I have tried to do my maximum.'[110]

Mobilization of state and non-state actors

In stark contrast to the MLA's seemingly apathetic response, the Bhola Cyclone's devastation and death toll generated massive societal response from a wide range of stakeholders in East Pakistan. University students, journalists, political cadres, and members of civil society, including intellectuals and artists, rushed to the affected districts with basic relief and there were instances of protest against the delayed interventions.[111] Bhashani insisted that every East Pakistani should devote themselves to relief distribution.[112] Even before the military government had

[107] 'Polls on Schedule: East Pakistan Must Have Maximum Autonomy: President Yahya Khan's Remarks at Press Conference in Dacca on November 27, 1970', *Bangladesh Documents*, p. 127.

[108] Ibid.

[109] The cholera epidemic was imminent in parts of the littoral districts, especially in Patuakhali and Bhola, where human corpses and animal cadavers awaited burial. *Purbadesh* and other newspapers began to publish reports related to cholera within a week of the cyclone. '*Bhola aar Patuakhali te hajar hajar lash bhashche* [Thousands of Corpses Float In and Around Bhola and Patuakhali]' (in Bengali), *Purbadesh*, 19 November 1970, p. 1.

[110] 'Polls on Schedule: East Pakistan Must Have Maximum Autonomy: President Yahya Khan's Remarks at Press Conference in Dacca on November 27, 1970', *Morning News*, 28 November 1970, p. 127.

[111] 'Fears in Pakistan for Island Survivors Still Awaiting Relief', *The Times*, 20 November 1970, p. 8, http://find.galegroup.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=nysl_ce_syr&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS134706036&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0 [accessed 20 August 2020].

[112] Ibid.

established a network for aid distribution, the devastated districts teemed with workers distributing relief.[113]

Moulana Bhashani and SMR made separate visits to disaster-affected areas and each began to incorporate the MLA's (lack of) disaster preparedness and mitigation efforts into their political rhetoric—for Bhashani in his political rallies and for SMR his stump speeches leading up to the elections.[114] However, while both leaders appropriated the disaster in their existing political rhetoric, they demanded different outcomes. Moulana Bhashani was one of the first political leaders to protest against the junta's response to the cyclone. On 23 November 1970, Moulana Bhashani addressed a huge public rally at Paltan Grounds in Dhaka. He addressed the crowd in Bengali and appealed to the masses from all sections of society. His first-hand experience in witnessing the destruction caused by the disaster and his speech at the historic rally were immortalized in a 'doctored' photojournalistic report with the incisive front-page headline 'Ora Keu Asheni' ('None of Them Came') and in a poem called Safed Punjabi ('The White Shirt') by the famous Bengali poet, Samsur Rahman.[115] At the political rally, Moulana Bhashani declared:

about ten to twelve hundred thousand men, women and children have perished in the disaster. But even after ten days of the catastrophic occurrence bodies await burial. There has been no measure on the part of government to bury the dead.

[113] Personal interview of a student leader of the then-banned Communist Party of East Pakistan.

[114] Political parties and popular newspapers were divided over the election postponement. Some political parties, including the NAP (Muzaffar Ahmed group) and the NAP (Bhashani group), appealed for a temporary reschedule of the elections and to focus all attention towards helping the victims. Nurul Amin, leader of the Pakistan Democratic Party, too, favoured election postponement. Dainik Sangbad, a popular Bengali newspaper, characterized the deferral as a moral responsibility. Political parties against postponement were referred to as 'power mongers', while those in favour of the postponement were termed as 'enemies of democracy'. Doubts were cast on whether the government machinery in East Pakistan was equipped to efficiently handle election and relief work.

[115] As recounted by a renowned cultural activist and a senior journalist associated with Purbadesh at the time, 'the suggestion to reverse the original image was given by the person putting together the front page report. All across the city and the districts, people were seething with anger at the complete lack of support on the part of the West Pakistani leaders and bureaucrats in wake of the massive humanitarian crisis! The catastrophe that had prompted the international organizations to send immediate relief to the suffering masses could not move the West Pakistani political leaders and bureaucrats', translated from Bengali, personal interview conducted by author conducted in Dhaka.

The stench of decomposing bodies of humans and cattle has left the region absolutely uninhabitable.[116]

Moulana Bhashani accused the central government of cruelty and indifference by suppressing the news of the devastation caused by the cyclone and urged people to stand by the suffering multitude in the southern districts.[117] Commenting on the futility of the integrationist rhetoric of a united Pakistan, Moulana Bhashani called for East Pakistan's independence.[118] In a rejoinder to his public address, the leader issued an official statement on 30 November 1970 to explain his demand, citing the MLA's ineptitude following the cyclone as one of many instances of its discrimination against East Pakistan.[119] Moulana Bhashani argued that the cyclone was an event that should redefine East Pakistan's political needs and future.[120] He urged SMR to give leadership to East Pakistanis to envision independence beyond regional autonomy.[121]

After the cyclone, as some East Pakistani politicians reprimanded the MLA for its delayed response, SMR initially maintained steadfast silence on the disaster. The foreign media and domestic newspapers commented on his silence on the issue of relief efforts undertaken by the military junta until the AL's press conference on 26 November 1970.[122] It was not until his visit to the cyclone-ravaged southern districts that he began to emphasize the MLA's neglect. With regard to

[116] Syed Abul Maksud, *Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan: Bhashani r Jibana, Karmakanda, rajniti o darsana [Moulana Bhashani's Biography]* (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Nawroz Sahitya Sansad, 1986), p. 322.
[117] Nurul Kabir, 'Bhashani's Ever-oppositional Democratic Spirit', in Choudhury, *Moulana Bhashani*, p. 86.
[118] Maksud, *Moulana Bhashani's Biography*, p. 322.
[119] Moulana Bhashani, 'Election Campaign Document', in Hasan Hafizur Rahman (ed.) *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddha [Liberation War Documents]*, Vol. II, *Background 1958–1971]* (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Ministry of Information, Republic of Bangladesh, 2003), pp. 584–586. In the document, the veteran leader drew attention to the series of calamities that befell the people. He urged the people of East Pakistan to resist the military regime's abuse of the Lahore Resolution of 1940, warned international organizations to refrain from conspiring against the Bengalis, and issued a threat to the foreign soldiers brought to distribute relief.
[120] Maksud, *Moulana Bhashani's Biography*, p. 329.
[121] Special correspondent, 'Declaration of Independent East Pakistan by Moulana Bhashani', *Weekly Matribhoomi* Jessore-based periodical, 5 December 1970, in *Liberation War Documents*, Vol. II, *Background 1958–1971]* (in Bengali), pp. 590–591.
[122] Ibid.

the MLA's post-disaster interventions, in SMR's campaign speeches, poor governance was interpreted as 'the Government's "betrayal" to peoples' cause'.[123]

SMR used his eye-witness account of the aftermath of the cyclone to support his platform of regional autonomy. Putting forward demands for relief and rehabilitation from the government, the AL party leader pledged that this large-scale governmental ineptitude will not be repeated again on Bangla Desh's soil and that the Six Points formula would solve East Pakistan's urgent problems concerning 'flood control or that of reconstructing the villages and rehabilitating the people ravaged by the cyclone'.[124] Specifically, SMR's press statement, issued in English with prominent national and international journalists and reporters in attendance, illustrated practical means to expedite the post-cyclone rehabilitation process under the Six Points Program.[125] SMR's statement was on the front page of all leading national newspapers and circulated widely by international press outlets. The Awami League leader's growing political influence in the international arena was evident and his press conference, in the words of an American diplomat in Dhaka, was 'memorable'.[126]

SMR stated that the loss of lives caused by the cyclone was a betrayal and he articulated that 'the feeling now pervades not just in towns and amongst the educated, but in every village home in every slum, in those islands amongst their dead, that we must rule ourselves'.[127] In the event that the polls were postponed, he made the people of Bangla Desh accountable by declaring that 'the people of Bangla Desh [*sic*] will owe

---

[123] 'Mujib Blames Government Failure: Speech at Satkhira (Khulna) on November 18th 1970', *The People*, 19 November 1970.

[124] Singh, *Bangladesh Documents*, p. 123. In the statement, Sheikh Mujib wrote: 'But all this can only be done, if we can attain full regional autonomy. We pledge today that what has happened to our brethren in the coastal areas must not allowed ever to happen again. The historic disaster has demonstrated to the world the tragic plight of the 70 million people of Bangla Desh. The feeling now pervades not just in the towns and amongst the educated, but in every village home in every slum, in those islands amongst the dead, that we must rule ourselves.'

[125] Ibid., Sheikh Mujib declared: 'If we are to save our people from the scourge of another cyclone and tidal-bore, a massive programme [*sic*] of reconstruction must be undertaken. This will involve the construction of an extensive system of coastal embankments, of an adequate network of cyclone-proof shelters, of better warning and communication facilities.'

[126] Blood, *Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, p. 115.

[127] Ibid.

it to the million who have died, to make the supreme sacrifice of another million lives, if need be, so that we can live as a free people and so that Bangla Desh can be the master of its own destiny'.[128]

Yet, on the demand of secession and independence, SMR remained moderate and sidestepped the issue with the succinct statement 'independence, no, not yet'.[129] Though he blamed the military authority for adopting a negligent attitude towards the disaster survivors, he refrained from explicitly attacking the MLA in the public arena.[130] SMR's demand was focused on regional autonomy and gaining control through the ballot—a rather moderate solution given the scale of the disaster and the heightened emotions in East Pakistan. Just before the elections, the formal press conference and the attention it received from the domestic and international press demonstrated to the world the AL leader's consolidated status as the undisputed leader of East Pakistan.

Discussion: a 'renegotiation' of human security?

The general elections held for the National Assembly on 7 December 1970 gave an overwhelming majority to the Awami League. It won 167 seats out of 169 seats in East Pakistan. In the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly elections, it won 298 out of 310 seats. From West Pakistan, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (ZAB)'s Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) won 83 seats out of 138 seats.[131] Following the elections, the AL remained committed towards framing a Constitution along the demands in the Six Points Program and forming the central government.

In a statement, the newly elected leader from East Pakistan urged all relief to be placed under the exclusive control of the provincial government of Bangla Desh and all exchange remittances to be earmarked for the cyclone survivors. These measures he believed would 'remove misgivings' over relief distribution in the cyclone-ravaged areas.[132] However, soon, a political impasse ensued between the AL

---

[128] Ibid.

[129] 'Mujibur Rahman Warns against Bid to Frustrate Elections: Remarks Made at a Press Conference at Dacca on November 26, 1970', *Morning News*, 27 November 1970.

[130] Kamal Siddiqui, 'Yahya Hopes Polling Will Go Ahead', *The Guardian*, 26 November 1970.

[131] 'After the General Elections', *Bangladesh Documents*, p. 130.

[132] 'Constitution Has to Be Based on Six-Points: Warning against Manoeuvres to Create Economic Crisis', *The Dawn*, 20 December 1970.

and the PPP. ZAB had no intention of being excluded from the process of reframing the Constitution or from central government.[133] With serious reservations against the Six Points Program, the PPP leader was against autonomy of the different provinces of Pakistan along with the central government being responsible for just defence and foreign affairs.[134] This impasse led to the suspension of the National Assembly for an indefinite period backed by the tacit support of the MLA. This suspension led in turn to the sequence of events that culminated in the Liberation War and the eventual inception of Bangladesh.

While the cyclone, as President Yahya Khan claimed, was not 'brought by the MLA', it clearly had a negative impact on the junta. The administration's pre-disaster interventions in terms of the construction of cyclone shelters and embankments, and post-disaster measures including delayed responses to international cyclone warnings, the reluctance to acknowledge the cyclone as a national emergency, and failure to effectively and systematically manage relief efforts were criticized by the East Pakistani press and politicians, the international press, Pakistan's international political allies, and the inhabitants of East Pakistan. The press in East Pakistan reported extensively on the sheer scale of the devastation in graphic detail, the inadequate status of disaster-preventive measures, and the neglect of recommendations in the littoral districts and remote islands particularly susceptible to cyclones, storm surges, and floods. Following the Bhola Cyclone, this intense coverage exposed that post-disaster governmental mitigation efforts like the Emergency Relief Funds and Emergency Cyclone Orders were paper promises caught in bureaucratic red tape. The development failures of the MLA resonated with perceptions of decades of economic exploitation, political alienation, and cultural appropriation by the West Pakistan regime and gave expanded reception in East Pakistan for absolute autonomy.

Moulana Bhashani used the emotional fervour caused by the cyclone and East Pakistan's outrage at the failures of the MLA to give new urgency to his pre-disaster platform for an independent East Pakistan. While SMR's Six Points Program proposed to reclaim East Pakistan's position on the basis of the Lahore Resolution, the Bhola Cyclone

[133] 'People's Party Will Not Sit in Opposition: No Constitution Without Our Co-operation', *The Pakistan Times*, 21 December 1970.
[134] ' Pakistan People's Party Not To Attend National Assembly Session if Awami League Not Flexible: Wants Adjustments in Six Points Two Subject Centre Not Acceptable', *The Dawn*, 16 February 1970.

made the demand for regional autonomy an absolute necessity in any future relationship with West Pakistan. SMR's characterization of the cyclone causalities as martyrs in East Pakistan's struggle for autonomy was a powerful message and demonstrated Mujib being responsive to the anger, grief, and frustration of Bengalis. Moulana Bhashani's political rally at Paltan Maidan on 23 November 1970 and SMR's press conference on 26 November 1970 brought the cyclone's massive death toll and devastation into dialogue with the existing narrative of Bengali nationalism and importantly into political discourse on the eve of the elections.

This brings us back to the core question of whether the cyclone should be credited as a critical juncture that ultimately resulted in the separation of East Pakistan. In this article, we have viewed the political history of the cyclone through Pelling and Dill's disaster-politics framework to assess the relationship between the disaster and political change. Following the cyclone, there was an 'increased attention on development failures and asymmetry in the social contract' in East Pakistan and the mobilization of actors to 'champion, direct, counter, or capture evolving critical discourses'.[135] When viewed through Pelling and Dill's model, it is clear that the disaster can be seen as a tipping point and/or catalyst for political transformation.

However, we do not feel that the cyclone fits the definition of a critical juncture that fundamentally altered the trajectory of the pre-disaster political context. Our analysis shows that there was considerable continuity between the pre- and post-disaster actors, political platforms, and rhetoric. We see little indication that the cyclone and its aftermath led to the emergence of new political actors and/or to a major change in the core political positions of established actors in both East and West Pakistan. SMR's initial instinct following the cyclone was to maintain his pre-disaster positions. He hesitated to politicize the disaster and, when he did, he used it to reinforce his long-standing call for autonomy within Pakistan. In this regard, he seems to have almost reluctantly stepped up his rhetoric for autonomy and refrained from publicly calling for independence, even after the cyclone and his landslide victory.

Our review of the historic record suggests that the AL and SMR were on track to do well in the elections irrespective of the cyclone. While it is certainly possible (and we believe likely) that the cyclone factored into the

---

[135] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster Politics', p. 29.

final vote tally and thus the scale of victory, it is not possible to show that it was a decisive factor that shifted the balance of power in the AL's favour. Therefore, we feel that it is impossible to *directly* connect the disaster with the creation of Bangladesh—as many have done. All indications are that, even if the cyclone *had not* occurred, the elections were going to shift the balance of power much more in favour of East Pakistan and the subsequent refusal of the MLA to accept the results would have led to some form to tension, possibly conflict, and down a path to increased autonomy and/or independence for East Pakistan. The threat to both the territorial integrity of Pakistan (via autonomy or independence) and West Pakistan's political dominance (if SMR and the Al ruled all of Pakistan) set in motion events that culminated in the genocide and the Liberation War.

Conclusion

The Bhola Cyclone reframed long-standing grievances and injected new layers of immediacy and urgency to in-process political movements in Pakistan. As discussed at the start of this article, the literature on disasters has long held that disasters can lead to a wide range of both intentional and inadvertent political, social, and economic transformation.[136] This is largely based upon the notion of disasters as ruptures that create (or can be used to create) new political contexts and/or open up spaces for the emergence of new political actors.[137] Here, we have shown that the Bhola Cyclone did not introduce new political actors; rather, it amplified the demands of established political leaders like Moulana Bhashani and SMR. It did not introduce new lines of political discourse, but rather reinforced pre-disaster arguments for Bengali nationalism and served as an example of both the failings of the junta and the need for political autonomy among the people of East Pakistan. In short, the significance of the 1970 cyclone was that it

---

[136] Oliver-Smith, *The Martyred City*, pp. 11–17. See also Gregory Bankoff and Joseph Christensen (eds) *Natural Hazards and Peoples in the Indian Ocean World: Bordering on Danger* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) for different case studies on the role of disasters in social, economic, and political transformation.

[137] Ben Wisner and Henry R. Luce, 'Disaster Vulnerability: Scale, Power and Daily Life', *GeoJournal* 30, no. 2 (1993), 134–135. See also Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill, *'Natural' Disasters as Catalysts of Political Action.* Chatham House: ISP/NSC Briefing Paper 06/01(2006), p. 2.

intensified pre-disaster tensions and boosted the political efficacy of East Pakistan's demands for autonomy.

In the model of political change that we used to shape our analysis, Pelling and Dill presented two possible outcomes: a disaster as a critical juncture or as an accelerated status quo. We see the 1970 Bhola Cyclone as a form of an accelerated status quo, in which 'change is path dependent and limited to a concentration or speeding up of pre-disaster trajectories which remain under the control of powerful elites both before and after an event'.[138] The disaster did not cause any obvious or substantial changes in the power dynamics of the political actors or their political positions and effectively sped up the pre-disaster trajectory of increasing political autonomy for East Pakistan. This requires us to revisit Pelling and Dill's model, as their definition of accelerated status quo implies (to us) that a disaster can reinforce pre-disaster power structures and political platforms, but it is the dominant political power *before* the disaster that benefits.

The Bhola Cyclone challenges this definition because the accelerated status quo did not benefit the dominant pre-disaster political power based in West Pakistan. Rather, it undermined them and gave increased viability and momentum to an already well-established opposition of East Pakistani political actors and lines of political rhetoric and policy. This suggests that disasters can factor into major political transformations without causing any fundamental changes in the composition of pre-disaster political actors, rhetoric, or political platforms. The Bhola Cyclone encourages us to explore how disasters can shift the balance of power between dominant political parties/actors and established opposition figures through a combination of undermining legitimacy, eroding support, boosting profiles, and translating post-disaster grief, frustration, and anger into a potent political force.

---

[138] Pelling and Dill, 'Disaster Politics', p. 29.