

60 Years of Struggle and Achievements - Bangladesh Awami League

Bangladesh Awami League is the oldest and biggest political party of Bangladesh. It originated in the soil of the country and evolved with the evolving hopes and aspirations of the people living on the Padma- Meghna- Jamuna delta. It is the party that gave leadership in the glorious Liberation War. Awami league is one of those political parties in the world under whose leadership struggles were led and won, tearing apart the chains of domination and servitude. Awami League represents the mainstream of the progressive, non-communal, democratic and nationalist politics of Bangladesh.

This half-a-century- old party has a glorious of relentless and uncompromising struggle against autocracy and communalism, against political and economic domination. Its greatest achievement is the emancipation of the Bangalee people from the colonial rule of Pakistan. This was the party that both germinated and helped blossom the Bangalee nationalism: the independence won in 1971 is the undying monument of that grand success of Awami League as a political party. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, our Father of the Nation, gave the leadership to the people and the party that took us through the glorious War of Liberation. Since then, the party has worked tirelessly to combat autocracy and communalism, to nourish the non communal political tradition and to institutionalize democracy through establishing a constitutionally elected government.

Therefore, as a political party, Awami League can claim to have attained success in the overall development of the political history of the country, particularly in the process of building a nation-state for the Bangalee people. It is continuing in its role as the people- oriented political party with progressive and pragmatic political, social and economic agenda for the betterment of the lot of the toiling masses of the country.

We plan to elaborate on some of the glaring successes of Awami League in its long history of struggle over the last fifty years.

The inception of Awami League: the rise of opposition politics

It is known to all that, in 1940, Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq tabled the historic Resolution incorporating the idea of more than one states in the Indian subcontinent. According to this resolution, there was to be a separate state comprising the Bangla speaking regions of the sub continent. But the plan was completely sidetracked when India was divided in 1947 on the basis of Mr. Jinnah's Two-nation Theory, and the artificial state of Pakistan came into being with two wings separated by a thousand miles. These two wings comprised two entirely different lands, languages and cultures. The establishment of Pakistan could not solve the problem of Bangalee nationality. On the contrary, the repressive policies of the Pakistani ruling elite against various nationalities brought the question of Bangalee's separate nationhood to the forefront. In this backdrop, within 4 months and 20 days of the creation of Pakistan an opposition student's organization named East Pakistan Student League was formed under the leadership of the then young and promising student leader, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (January 4, 1948). On June 23, nest year, a meeting of the leaders and workers known to be the supporters of Hussain Shaheed suhrawardy was held at 'Rose Garden' of K. M. Das lane, Dhaka. There a new political party named Awami Muslim League was formed with Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani as chair, Shamsul Haq of Tangail as Secretary, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (then interned in Jail) as Joint Secretary and Yar Mohammad as Treasurer. It was the first oppsition party in the then East Bangal (later

renamed East Pakistan). In a process of secularization, the word 'Muslim' was eventually dropped from the name of the party. Since its inception, Awami League has championed the cause of the political rights of the Bangalee people and fought relentlessly for the attainment of those rights. The present Bangladesh Awami League inherits the legacy of the party founded in 1949. Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina is the present president of Bangladesh Awami League.

Language Movement and the Struggle for the Dignity of our Mother Tongue

The Bangalee people living on the Padma- Meghna- Jamuna delta first rose in revolt on the question of the state language of Pakistan. The language policy of the non-Bangalee rulers of Pakistan was not only undemocratic but also strongly biased against the various nationalities. They refused the claim of Bangla, the language of the majority people of Pakistan, to be one of the state languages alongside Urdu. Rather they tried to impose Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan. The people of East Bengal staged their clamorous protest against this blatant injustice and a strong mass-movement originated on the question of state language. Both Awami League and its student wing Chhatra League evolved through this Language movement that stretched from 1948 till 1952. The leaders of these two parties played the dominant role in organizing this movement. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name should be specially mentioned in this regard.

On March 11, 1948 he led a siege of the East Pakistan Secretariat and was arrested along with some of his colleagues. On March 21, 1948, in a meeting in the Racecourse of Dhaka (now Suhrawardy Garden), Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan declared unequivocally, "Urdu and only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan." A number of young activists including Bangabandhu raised their voice of protest against this declaration. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the target of the wrath of the Muslim League government for a number of reasons which included his active participation in the language movement, his protest against the repressive measures taken by the Muslim League government, his leadership in the movement of the class four employees of Dhaka University etc. He was being thrown into Jail into Jail again and again. He was still in jail when the final phase of the Language movement started in 1952. He got himself transferred from the central jail to Dhaka Medical College on medical ground and established contacts with the leaders outside.

Through chits smuggled out of the hospital he gave directives to the leaders of the movement. On February 16, 1952, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib and his close associate late Mohiuddin Ahmed went on hunger-strike-till-death. With a view to isolating them from the outside world, the government transferred them to Faridpur Jail. Bangabandhu was then Joint Secretary of Awami League. This hunger strike added a new dimension to the final phase of the Language Movement. The police opened fire on the demonstrating student on February 21, 1952, killing several persons. This bloody incident opened a new chapter in the history of the Liberation struggle of the Bangalee nation.

It should be mentioned here that the movement for Bangla Language was being conducted under the aegis of a multi-party forum called the 'All Party State Language Action Committee. It was formed on January 30, 1952, and Awami League played a leading role in its formation. On the streets, inside the prison, in the Constituent Assembly-everywhere Awami League and Bangabandhu fought relentlessly for the cause of mother tongue. In a speech given in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, Bangabandhu made this memorable comment : "It is not important whether we know any other language or not. We want to speak in Bangla in this House." When new conspiracies started being hatched against Bangla language and Bangalee culture in the sixties, Bangabandhu and his party organized a strong protest movement against those nefarious designs of the Ayub regime.

In 1974, after the Liberation of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered his speech in the UN in Bangla and thus for the first time glorified our language in the world arena. His daughter, the present Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina can justifiably claim the credit of glorifying Bangla once again : it was due to her initiative that UNESCO has declared (November 17, 1999) the 21st of February as the International Mother Language Day. From now on, February 21, the day of martyrdom for Bangla, will be celebrated all over the world every year in recognition of the right of the mother tongues of all speech communities of the world. The glorious sacrifice of the Bangalee nation has now acquired international recognition through this decision of UNESCO.

The Election of the United Front

In March 1954, an election of the last Pakistan Provincial Assembly was held, which is known as the United Front election. The opposition political parties, under the leadership of the mainstream party, Awami League formed the United Front to fight the electoral battle against the ruling Muslim League. It was formally inaugurated in December 1953 with Hussain Shaheed Sugrawardy, Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Chief proponents. United Front chalked out a 21 point socio-economic programme as its election manifesto; it included the 'State language issue' and 'the demand for the autonomy of East Bengal' as two main points. The election symbol of the Front was 'boat'. It had a landslide victory, winning 300 seats out of 309. The ruling Muslim League got only 9 seats. Out of the 237 muslim seats, United Front bagged 223 (Awami League topped the list among the members by winning 137 seats). This electoral win by United Front marked a watershed in the politics of East Pakistan. The ruling Muslim not only suffered a crushing defeat; it was virtually wiped out as a political force from East Bengal. For the Bangalees it was a revolution through ballot. But the United Front Government formed under the leadership of Fazlul Huq was short-lived : the central Government of Pakistan ousted it on the 56th day of its assumption of power. Bangalees were outraged and infuriated by this nefarious act on the part of the Pakistani ruling clique. The election of 1954 and its aftermath played an important role in the evolution of the concept of the separate Bangalee nationhood.

A Step towards secularization

Since the beginning, Awami League has been a secular democratic party. The term 'Muslim' was appended to the name of the party at the time of its foundation as a political tactic only. India was divided on the basis of a communal birucation, and in 1949 it was really unthinkable to launch an opposition political party with a declared secularist agenda. Moreover, the separate election system for defferent religious communitis was still operative in Pakistan. The founding fathers of Awami League, therefore, thought it opportune to hide their intentions under the name 'Awami Muslim league' for the time being. Meanwhile, through the cataclysmie events of the Language Movement, the United Front election of 1954 and the defeat of Muslim League in that election created a secular political atmosphere in East Bengal. A resolution in favour of 'non-communal combined system was adopted (Murree Pact, 1955), for whice Awami League can claim the sole credit. In the backdrop of this, in the initiative of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then General Secretary of the Party, the three-day 3rd council meeting was held in Rupahal Cinema Hall of Dhaka on 21-23 October, 1953. In

this council, a resolution regarding the change in the name of the party was adopted : the word 'Muslim' was dropped and the party was renamed 'East Pakistan Awami League'. It was a historical and bold political decision, as a result of which the party became open to all irrespective of caste, creed and colour. The secular democratic character of the party was thus institutionalized and perfected.

Formation of government, split in the party, ouster from power

In August 1956, the governor of East Bengal called upon Awami League to form the provincial government. The Awami League government was formed next month with Aatur Rahman Khan, the leader of the Awami League Parliamentary Party, as the Chief Minister. His cabinet included Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangabandhu was entrusted with the important portfolio of the Ministry of Industries, commerce and Labour. Awami League stayed in power for about two years. In spite of a series of conspiracies hatched by the central government, the Awami League government in East Bengal succeeded in taking some important steps in various fields. These included the tackling of serious problem of food-shortage, the release of the political prisoners, giving 'test relief' to the landless peasants, the granting of financial aid to the families of the Language Movement martyrs, the declaration of February 21 as a government holiday, the observance of Pahela Baishakh as Bangla New Year's Day, the establishment of a Veterinary College in Mymensingh, of Fenchuganj Fertilizer Factory and Savar Dairy Farm and of Film Development Corporation (FDC) etc. Bangabandhu played a very strong role in all these.

We must note here a singular event that took place during the Awami League rule. Bangabandhu was concurrently holding the posts of the Party General Secretary and a cabinet minister. The party decided to segregate the leadership of the Organization and the ministry. Bangabandhu was given the choice of keeping any of the two posts. This problem arose in the case of a few others also. Bangabandhu unhesitatingly made his choice he left the ministry and opted for the post of the party secretary. This shows how much importance he laid upon the party organization. This rare incident proves the fact that Bangabandhu was the central force in Awami League and that his commitment to the party was above everything else. Incidentally, all the three vice-presidents of the party opted for ministership and left the party posts. Almost simultaneously with the formation of government in East Bengal by AL, the party under the leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy formed government of only 13 members of Awami League and was backed by the Republican Party. But it lasted only 13 months (12 September 1956-11 October 1957). Naturally, it was too short a tenure for the Suhrawardy government to do anything significant. But even within this period, the AL administration took a few bold steps. These include the adoption of 'parity' policy with a view to lessening the multiple disparities between the two wings of Pakistan; the holding of the session of Pakistan National Assembly in Dhaka (for the first time); the passing of an act in the assembly in favour of non-communal joint electorate system (October 14, 1956); the establishment of Jute Marketing Corporation; taking steps to facilitate industrialization and expansion of trade and commerce in East Bengal; the establishment of IWTA for developing the river transport system and WAPDA for flood control, etc.

The civil and military bureaucracy had exerted its unhealthy influence on the administration since the very inception of the state of Pakistan. The AL government of Suhrawardy successfully curbed this influence. Moreover, with a view to basing the fledgling democracy on a firm footing, Suhrawardy stressed the need for holding a general election in his very first address to the nation. These bold steps taken by the Suhrawardy government, particularly its pledge to hold a general election unnerved the ruling clique and its frontman President Iskander Mirza. It was at his behest that Republican Party (a party that Mirza himself had helped found) withdrew its support from Suhrawardy Ministry. Immediately after this President Iskander Mirza forced Suhrawardy to resign.

One big event for Awami League that took place during this period was the split in the party. The two top leaders of AL, Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhashni were having a difference of opinion for quite some time on the question of the foreign policy of Pakistan. Bhasani was in favour of a non-aligned foreign policy, while Suhrawardy favoured strong links with the powerful countries of the West, particularly with America. Suhrawardy's stance was backed by a pragmatic assessment of the contemporary geo-political realities of South Asia. Most of the leaders of Awami League under the guidance of the Party General Secretary Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman supported Suhrawardy's standpoint. On February 7-8, 1957, Bhasani hosted the special council meeting of AL at Kagmari Tangail. There the division of opinion came to the fore. The split in the party could be forestalled at Kagmari Council, but soon it became inevitable. Maulana Bhasani resigned his post of party President on March 18, 1957; within a few days, 9 out of the 37 members of the Working Committee resigned in support of Maulana Bhasani. On July 25-26, 1957, Bhasani called 'Democratic Workers Conference' at Rupmahal Cinema of Dhaka. There, a new political party named 'National Awami Party' was formed with Bhasani as its president. A few leftist organization joined NAP. In this time of crisis, the youthful General Secretary of AL took the reins of the party in his hands. Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish was made the party president in the place of Maulana Bhasani. Bangabandhu, at this juncture, left his post in the provincial ministry in order to devote his whole time to the reorganization of the party.

The Anti-Ayub Movement

On October 7, 1958, President General Iskander Mirza proclaimed Martial Law in Pakistan. Within 20 days of this, he was ousted by the Army Chief General Ayub Khan in a counter coup. Ayub's decade of autocratic rule started. The constitution was abrogated; the national and the provincial assemblies were dissolved; all political activities were prohibited. A large number of political leaders and activists including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were thrown into jail. By passing the notorious 'EBDO' Act, Ayub Khan declared 78 politicians including the popular leader H. S. Suhrawardy unfit for being candidates in elections. Measures were taken to stifle the voice of the press. Moreover, Ayub Khan introduced the so-called 'Basic Democracy' substituting direct elections with an 'Electoral College' with the ulterior purpose of perpetuating his regime. He arranged for the framing of a new Constitution (1952), which was based on the 'Basic Democracy' concept on a total reliance on the military bureaucracy.

In spite of all repressive measures, Awami League continued functioning, surreptitiously organising group meetings to devise ways and means of a possible movement against the Ayub Government. Soon an opportunity presented itself, when the government arrested H. S. Suhrawardy on June 30, 1962. The news of the arrest spread like wild fire and the students started strikes in educational institutions and came out to the streets. Anti-martial Law posters were put up on the city walls. In this backdrop, on February 7, 1962, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and thrown into jail. The publication of the Report on Education Policy by Sharif Commission, which was constituted by Ayub Khan, added fuel to the fire. The entire student community demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Report terming it as anti-people and inimical to Bangla language and culture. On September 17 (1962), the police opened fire on the agitating public killing a number of people including a student named Babul. The day (September 17) has been observed as the 'Education Day' ever since. This incident gave rise to a student- upsurge forcing the government to withhold the Sharif Commission Report. Side by side with the student movement, attempts were made to initiate a political movement against Ayub Khan. On June 24, 1962, nine eminent political leaders of different parties issued a statement opposing the new constitution and calling for the restoration of democracy. This is known as 'the statement of nine leaders'. Ataur Rahman Khan and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman signed the statement on behalf of Awami League. Within a short time, under the auspices of Awami League, a multi-party alliance named 'National Democratic Front' (NDF) was formed. Upon his release from prison, the leader of All Pakistan Awami League, H. S. Suhrawardy took the leadership of NDP. In 1962-63, NDF held a series of Political rallies in both the wings of Pakistan and it created a widespread awakening among the people. Suhrawardy's death in 1963, however, was an irreparable loss to NDF. Under the initiative of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the decision to revive Awami League was taken in a meeting at his residence in Dhanmondi Road no. 32.

The Presidential election of Pakistan was held on January 2, 1965, on the basis of Basic Democracy (the electoral college comprised only 80,000 voters). Despite the meagre chance of winning the election under such a situation, the opposition decided to fight it out jointly. With this end in view and under the auspices of Awami League a united front named Combined Opposition Party (COP) was formed on July 21, 1964. Miss Fatema Jinnah was nominated the candidate of COP for the Presidential polls. Although Miss Jinnah lost in the election, her election campaign created a lot of stir in the public. In Dhaka city, the provincial capital, Ayub Khan got fewer votes than Fatema Jinnah. One positive result that emerged from this election was that it exposed the hollowness and anti-people character of the so-called Basic Democracy system.

Communal riots of 1964

Awami League believes in communal harmony and peace. It has always fought against communalism. In 1964, a communal riot broke out between the Muslim and the Hindu communities in Dhaka, in Narayanganj Adamjee area and elsewhere. Things were compounded when the Bangalees and the Beharis started clashing in several places. As the situation worsened, scores of people got killed; looting and arson went on in full scale. Hundreds of people were rendered homeless. The Ayub government was involved in this riot: their aim was to divert the anti-government sentiments of the people to a different issue. With a view to countering this communal riot a 'Resistance Committee' was formed under the aegis of Bangabandhu. The Committee published a pamphlet titled "Stand up in Resistance, East Pakistan!" and distributed it among the public in hundreds and thousands. Bangabandhu incurred the displeasure of an angry Ayub for this and the government started a suit against him in the court.

The 6-point Programme: The 'Magna Carta' of the Bangalees' national struggle

The 1965 Indo-Pak War came as an eye-opener for the Bangalees. During the War, East Bengal became completely isolated from the rest of the world. East Pakistanis were left to their fate, without military defence and security, while the Pakistani rulers kept themselves busy in defending the West Pakistani frontiers. This exposed the extreme callousness of the Pakistani rulers towards the Bangalee people. In this backdrop, soon after the end of the War, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman formulated the historic 6-point programme. His purpose was to voice the just demands of the people of East Bengal for self determination and economic emancipation from the exploitative Pakistani colonial state-system. The six points were as follows:

Point 1:

Pakistan shall be a Federal State. There shall be parliamentary government formed by a legislature elected on the basis of universal adult franchise.

Point 2:

The federating units or the provinces shall deal with all affairs except foreign relations and defence.

Point 3:

There shall be two separate but easily convertible currencies for the two wings of Pakistan. Or, alternatively, there may be a single currency with the proviso that the Federal Bank shall take adequate measures to stop the siphoning of money from East Pakistan to West Pakistan.

Point 4:

The federating units or provinces shall reserve the right to levy taxes. The central government, of course, shall have some share of the tax proceeds.

Point 5:

Separate accounts shall be maintained for the foreign exchange earnings of the two wings. The foreign exchange earned from foreign trade shall be under the control of the respective wings. The federating units shall be independent in conducting trades with foreign countries.

Point 6:

The federating provinces shall be able to raise para-militia or para-military forces for their own defences.

No sooner had the 6-point programme been published than Ayub Khan declared it 'secessionist' and styled its author Bangabandhu as the enemy number one of Pakistan. Ayub also threatened to use brute force to suppress this charter of demands. But Awami League and its leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained undaunted by such threats. Bangabandhu started a 3-month long mass-contact programme which took him to every nook and corner of Bangladesh. In the public meetings, amidst thunderous slogans, he presented the 6-point programme as demands to save our (Bangalees') life. The government started arresting him now in Sylhet, now in Mymensingh, or in Dhaka or in Narayanganj. Bangabandhu was arrested eight times in the first three months of the 6-point movement. By then Bangabandhu had become the President of Awami League. He was finally thrown into jail on May 8, 1966, a general strike was observed all over East Pakistan in support of the 6-point programme and for the release of Bangabandhu. The police fired in Tejgaon, Tongi and Narayanganj killing 13 people. This was followed by large-scale arrests of the leaders and followers of Awami League throughout the country. All these measures taken by the Ayub regime proved counter-productive. 6-point programme became the heartfelt demand of the common masses. Students put forward their 11-point programme which complemented the 6-point charter of demands. Thus the political situation in East Pakistan became extremely volatile: the stage was set for a great explosion of popular anger through an all-out mass-movement against the Ayub rule.

The Agartala Conspiracy Case & the Mass-upsurge of 1969

President Ayub Khan of Pakistan took resort to a nefarious plan of quelling the growing disturbances caused by the 6-point programme. At his instance, in January 1968, a false case was instituted. This has become infamous in the history as the Agartala Conspiracy Case. 35 Bangalee civil and military officers were accused of treason and conspiracy against the state of Pakistan. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then under detention, was made the principal accused and the case itself was officially styled, "State versus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Others." President Ayub formed a special tribunal to try the accused. On June 19, 1968 the trial started in the Kurmitola cantonment of Dhaka. There was great turbulence in East Pakistan because of this case. The student community started a united movement against the Ayub regime on the basis of the 6-point programme of Bangabandhu and their own 11-point charter of demands. They defied the section 144 promulgated by the police, broke the barricades put by the East Pakistan Rifles and came out to the streets in thousands. People from all walks of life joined them. They chanted the slogans - "We'll break the locks of the jail and free Sheikh Mujib"; "Your leader, my leader, Sheikh Mujib, Sheikh Mujib", etc. A mass-upsurge took place; the Pakistani rulers ordered shooting in different places. Law and order situation worsened to such an extent that the rebellious mob took control of all important points in the Dhaka city. During this movement, a lot of people were killed: Asad, a student leader of Dhaka University, Dr. Shamsuzzoha, a teacher of Rajshahi University and Matiur, a school student of Dhaka and Sg't Zahurul Huq, an accused of the Agartala Conspiracy Case were among them. On February 22, Pakistan Government was forced to grant unconditional release to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and withdraw the 'Agartala Conspiracy Case'. Next day, in a mammoth gathering in the then Race Course Maidan of Dhaka, Bangabandhu was accorded a grand reception. Amidst thunderous applause by the million of people gathered there. Sheikh Mujib was conferred the title 'Bangabandhu' (The Friend of Bengal). On March 25, 1969, Ayub Khan was forced to step down from power in shame and ignominy. The decade of his autocratic rule came to an end.

The elections of 1970: Awami League wins the historic mandate

General Yahya Khan succeeded Ayub Khan as President of Pakistan. He declared the general elections to be held next year. In December 1970, the general elections were held on the basis of universal adult franchise and a proportionate distribution of seats in terms of population between the two wings of Pakistan.

Awami League decided to fight these elections as a part of its struggle for self-determination for the Bangalee people. Its election manifesto was the 6-point programme; its election symbol was 'boat'. During the election campaign, Bangabandhu termed the election was a referendum on the 6-point programme. During this time, on November 12, a devastating cyclone laid waste the whole of Southern Bengal, killing half a million people. The central government of Pakistan showed extreme callousness in the face of such a great human disaster. Awami League capitalized on this issue during the campaign. Awami League won a stunning victory in these elections, winning 160 out of 162 seats in East Pakistan. It bagged 72.57% of the total votes cast. AL won a similar landslide victory in the provincial Assembly elections also - it won 288 seats out of 300 and bagged 389% of total votes cast. Awami League won all the 7 women

seats in the National Assembly and all the 10 women seats in the Provincial Assembly. The net result was, Awami League emerged as the single majority party in the Pakistan National Assembly with 167 seats out of a total of 313. On the other side, Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party won 88 seats (all from the western wing) and emerged as the second largest Parliamentary group. These were the last general elections of the united Pakistan.

Non-Cooperation Movement, the 7th March Speech of Bangabandhu and the Preparations for the War of Liberation

Awami League's attainment of single majority in the 1970 elections frightened the Pakistani rulers. They could well read the meaning of the AL victory-it meant that the Bangalee would now wield the state-power and frame a new constitution based on the 6-point programme. They would in no way let such a thing happen. Therefore they started their conspiracy immediately after the results were out. Along with the military-civil bureaucracy, Mr. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party joined in this palace-intrigue.

On January 3, 1971, Awami League under the leadership of Bangabandhu arranged an Oath-taking ceremony for the newly elected members of the National and the Provincial Assembly in the Race Course Maidan of Dhaka. The Awami League MPs took a solemn oath to frame the constitution of the country on the basis of the 6-point and the 11-point Programmes. Yahaya Khan had convened the opening session of the National Assembly on the 3rd of March; but on the 1st of March, he postponed the session for an indefinite period. As the news of this postponement spread, the whole province reacted quickly with anger and dismay. People came out to the streets; educational institutions and offices closed down. In protest of Yahaya's declaration, Bangabandhu called hartal on March 2 and 3 in entire East Bengal. Curfew was clamped on the night of March 2, but the angry mobs broke the curfew. The army opened fire on the protesters killing and wounding hundreds. The whole province rose in protest like a roaring sea. This was the time of the uprising of a new nation whose undisputed leader was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The slogan 'Joy Bangla' (Victory of Bangladesh) became the war-cry of the multitudes. Along with 'Joy Bangla' people chanted, "Take up arms, you heroic Bangalees and liberate Bangladesh", "Great leader of a great nation, Sheikh Mujib, Sheikh Mujib". On March 2, in a student-mass-gathering in front of Dhaka University Arts Building the new national flag of Bangladesh (a red sun on a green background and the map of 'Bangladesh' printed in yellow on the red disc) was hoisted. Events followed in a quick succession. On March 3, in the presence of Bangabandhu, the 'manifesto of the independent Bangladesh' was read out in a mammoth public meeting at Paltan Maidan; Independent Bangladesh Central Student's Action Committee was formed; an all-out non-cooperation movement against the Pakistani rulers started under the direct command of Bangabandhu, who became the virtual ruler of the province. He started issuing daily directives to be followed by the public. From March 2 to March 25, 1971 Sheikh Mujib became the wielder of all political and civil power in East Pakistan. All government and non-government offices, the Secretariat, autonomous bodies, the High court, the police, Radio and television, Banks and Insurance companies, Transport authorities-everybody defied the order of the Pakistan government and observed the directives issued by Bangabandhu from his Road no. 32, Dhanmondi residence. As Sheikh Mujib became the de facto head of government, his residence turned into something like No. 10 Downing Street of the British Prime Minister's Official residence.

During this time, the most significant event took place on March 7, when Bangabandhu addressed a mammoth gathering, a virtual sea of human faces, in Race Course Maidan. About a million people gathered in that historic meeting on that fateful day in the annals of the Bangalee race. Bangabandhu's address on that day laid the foundation-stone of the future independent Bangladesh as he gave a green signal for starting the War of Liberation by saying those inspiring poetic lines: "Our struggle this time is the struggle for freedom; our struggle this time is the struggle for independence". The March 7 speech of Bangabandhu has been compared with the Gettysburg address of President Abraham Lincoln. In this short speech, Bangabandhu narrated the story of the 23 years of Pakistani exploitation and the deprivation of the Bangalee people, explained the points of conflicts with the Pakistani rulers, declared an elaborate programme for the non-cooperation movement, hinted at the possible strategy of resistance against the enemy attack. He said, "Building forts in

each homestead. You must resist the enemy with whatever you have... Remember, we have given a lot of blood, a lot more blood we shall give if need be, but we will liberate the people of this country, insha Allah... The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation; the struggle this time is the struggle for independence. Joy Bangla”.

This electrifying declaration by Bangabandhu was virtually the declaration of the independence of Bangladesh. But, of course, Bangabandhu showed the political sagacity of not making the declaration too openly; rather he chose to adopt a ‘wait and see’ policy in order to observe the next move of the Pakistani government. A UDI would be disastrous at the particular point time.

The Great War of Liberation and the Emergence of an Independent Bangladesh

The military junta of Yahya Khan started a dialogue with the leader of the majority party, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. But it was actually an attempt to hoodwink the Bangalees—the junta was taking time to make their military preparations complete for a final crackdown. They smuggled in arms and ammunition from West Pakistan and a large number of army personnel, too. On March 25, at midnight, they led a sudden attack on the unarmed Bangalees in Dhaka and other places. Thus began the so-called ‘Operation Searchlight’, the most heinous and barbarous genocide in the history of mankind. A little after the midnight in the early hours of March 26, 1971, Bangabandhu declared the independence of Bangladesh. He sent a message containing the declaration of independence to his party leaders in Dhaka and Chittagong over the wireless of the then East Pakistan Rifles. The message read:

“The Pakistani Army has launched a sudden attack on the EPR Headquarters at Pilkhana and the Police Line at Rajarbagh and they have killed many people in the city. Street fights are going on in Dhaka and Chittagong. Our freedom fighters are valiantly fighting for liberating their motherland from the enemies. In the name of Almighty Allah, this is my appeal and order to you—seek the assistance from the Police, the EPR, the Bengal Regiment and the Ansars to liberate the country. No compromise; the victory must be ours. Expel the last enemy from our sacred motherland. Reach this message to all Awami League leaders and workers and all other patriotic and freedom loving people. May Allah bless you. You Bangla.”

With the army crackdown on the 25th March night and the declaration of independence by Bangabandhu after the midnight, the resistance struggle and the armed War of Liberation of the Bangalees started all over the country. The junta arrested Bangabandhu from his Dhanmondi Road No. 32 residence immediately after the declaration of independence. A few days later he was taken to West Pakistan. In order to give the declaration by Bangabandhu a constitutional basis and to conduct the War of Liberation under a central leadership, the Awami League leaders on behalf of the elected MNAs and MPAs issued a statement on April 10, 1971. This is known as ‘the constitutional declaration of independence’.

It read:

“According to the verdict given by the sovereign people of Bangladesh in favour of the elected representatives, we, the elected representatives, have formed the constituent Assembly on the basis of discussions among ourselves. Considering the establishment of equality, human dignity and social justice for the people of Bangladesh a sacred duty

enjoined upon us, we do hereby declare the decision of transforming Bangladesh into a Sovereign People's Republic and endorse the earlier declaration of independence by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Raman. This declaration of independence will be deemed effective from March 26, 1971."

In the same declaration, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was made the President and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The provisional government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was formed (now famous as the Mujibnagar Government) with Syed Nazrul Islam as Vice-President (to act as President in the absence of Bangabandhu) and Tajuddin Ahmed as Prime Minister. On April 17, 1971, the 'Mujibnagar government' took oath of office in Baidyanattala of Meherpur district, in the presence of the elected representatives, Awami League leaders, freedom-fighters, local and foreign journalist and a large number of common people. The provisional government was formed in the following manner:

President & the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces : Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Acting President : Syed Nazrul Islam

Prime Minister : Tajuddin Ahmed

Minister of Foreign Affairs : Khandakar Mustaq Ahmed

Finance Minister : Caption M. Mansur Ali

Home Minister : A H M Kamaruzzaman

This provisional Government of Mujibnagar gave leadership to the War of Liberation in the name of Bangabandhu. After the formation of the provisional government, the Liberation War found a sound footing: The Mukti Bahini (Bangladesh freedom fighters) fast grew into a highly disciplined combative force. The freedom fighters started their guerrilla attacks on the enemies all over Bangladesh and within months succeeded in forcing the Pakistani soldiers to confine themselves in their cantonments. On December 3, Pakistan made a desperate attempt to break the impasse by leading an air attack on India. An all-out War between India and Pakistan Started. The Mukti Bahini and the Indian army formed the Allied Forces under a joint command. On December 6, 1971 India accorded formal recognition to independent Bangladesh. The 13-day War came to an end on December 16, with the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers to the Joint Command of Bangladesh and India in the historic Race Course Maidan of Dhaka.

The Post-liberation period & the struggle for national reconstruction

After the Liberation, Bangabandhu and the Awami League government faced a formidable challenge in the sphere of national reconstruction. The whole country was ravaged by the non-month long bloody War of Liberation. Communication system, the posts and industries were completely in ruins. Schools and colleges, factories and food silos, the village huts and bazaar were burnt to ashes by the marauding Pakistani soldiers. All these things had to be rebuilt. Then there was the staggering problem of the rehabilitation of the families of the martyr, of those who were maimed by the War and of the women raped and tortured by the Pak army. Ten million refugees, who had fled to India, were to be brought back and rehabilitated. The economy was in a shambles, foreign currency reserve was nil; the food silos were empty. The

possibility of a famine causing death of millions was being forecast. Things were compounded by the drought of 1972, the devastating cyclone of 1973, the adverse effect of the worldwide recession owing to the Arab-Israeli War and the floods of 1974 etc. A greater threat to the political stability of the newborn country was posed by the conspiracies of the defeated anti-liberation quarters. A few pro-Chinese leftists started a nefarious campaign by setting jute godowns on fire, uprooting railway tracks, attacking police outposts and committing clandestine political murders. The government of Bangabandhu had to confront these challenges of reconstruction on a War footing.

On his return from his confinement in Pakistan on January 10, 1972, Bangabandhu devoted himself to this stupendous task of reconstruction. We can enumerate the successes of the Bangabandhu government of 3 years briefly as follows:

(a) Restoration of communication system within the shortest possible time; the clearing of mines at Chittagong and Chalna Ports;

(b) Rehabilitation of 10 million refugees who had taken shelter in India;

(c) Granting of economic aid to the families of martyred freedom fighters;

(d) Rehabilitation of nearly 3 lakh women who were dishonoured during the War;

(e) Sending of disabled freedom-fighters abroad for treatment;

(f) Ensuring the return of the Indian forces within 3 months of the Liberation;

(g) Framing of one of the world's best constitutions within 10 months;

(h) Introduction of Parliamentary system;

(i) Holding of general elections in 1973 (AL won 293 out of 300 seats);

(j) Reorganization of the Defence Forces;

(k) Appointment of the Kudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission for framing a scientific and secular education policy;

(l) The promulgation of a democratic ordinance for the universities (1973);

(m) Nationalization of 40 thousand primary schools;

(n) Winning of recognition by 140 nations of the world;

(o) Signing the Ganges-Water Sharing Treaty with India ensuring 44,000 cusecs of water for Bangladesh; etc, etc.

In 1974, when the anti-liberation forces accelerated their disruptive activities Bangladesh felt the necessity of uniting all the pro-Liberation forces of the country under one banner. With this end in view, he formed the Bangladesh Krishak-Sramik Awami League (24 January, 1975). He also declared the programme called the 'Second Revolution' in order to revitalize the economy and to cement the national unity. As a result of this, the law and order situation improved considerably; the prices of essential commodities came down and political stability returned to the country.

At this critical juncture, when Bangladesh was striding forward under the able leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the cruelest assassination of history took place on August 15, 1975. The founding architect of Bangladesh, Father of the Nation, the Glorious Leader of Liberation War, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with all the members of his family then in Dhaka and other leaders. Anti-Liberation and reactionary international forces with the help of their local henchmen staged this most brutal murder of all times.

The post - '75 movement against autocracy and for the restoration of democracy

The anti-liberation reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces usurped the state-power through the assassination of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975. For the subsequent 15 years, Bangladesh was ruled by the same forces sometimes under a civilian guise, sometimes under military dictatorship. Khandakar Mushtaq one of the chief conspirators behind the Bangabandhu killing ruled for a few months (1975) before being ousted by General Zia who ruled till 1981. After he was murdered in an abortive coup, Justice Sattar came to power (1981-82). General Ershad ousted the elected government of Sattar and assumed power in 1982 and continued his military rule upto 1990. In 1990, he was forced to stepdown through mass-upheaval which reminded many of the mass-upsurge of 1969 against Ayub Khan. During these 15 years, the successive rulers tried their utmost to obliterate the memories of Liberation War efface the name of Bangabandhu from the mind of the public, sheltered and even rewarded the killers of Bangabandhu, allowed the communal politics to operate freely. Coups, conspiracies, social anarchy and corruption held unhindered sway in the country. In the elections of 1991, Khaleda Zia's Party BNP was voted to power. Like the earlier regimes, Khaleda Zia's government pursued the same policies.

During these dark years of our national life, Awami League had the self imposed task of fighting for democratic rights of the people. After 15th August 1975, there came another cataclysmic event that struck Awami League very seriously and led to a temporary vacuum in the leadership: four national leader, Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M. Mansur Ali and A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman were killed in Dhaka Central Jail by the same conspirators who had killed Bangabandhu.

A. The Rule of General Zia

After the killing of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975, Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmed assumed power for a brief period. But General Ziaur Rahman, who was the chief beneficiary of the killing, could not keep himself behind the wings for long. On November 7, 1975, he assumed the power in a military coup de tat. Ruthless and ambitious as he was, he took some quick steps to consolidate his power: One such step was to get Colonel Taher, a valiant freedom fighter whom he had duped in order to ascend to power, summarily hanged (July 21, 1976), on a charge of treason. This Machiavelli of Bangladesh politics later put on the mask of democracy by starting a political party named Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) where he assembled all the anti-liberation and communal elements. He had to face at least 20 coup attempts. He crushed these attempts brutally by killing numberless freedom-fighter personnel in the army. It was Zia who first rewarded the self-confessed killers of Bangabandhu by giving them employment in foreign missions of Bangladesh. It was during his time that election-rigging and elections by blueprint started in Bangladesh. For example, on My 30, 1977 he held a referendum in which it was shown that 99% voters had taken parts. Zia got 98.88 of the vote cast in his favour. The general elections of February 18, 1979 was also a big hoax: as per the government blueprint, his BNP was shown to have won 207 seats out of 300. Zia ensured the two-thirds majority of his party in the parliament with an ulterior motive: he had a plan to change the secular provisions of the constitution and to regularize the various proclamations and regulations passed during his rule as a military dictator.

Awami League did not let anything to go unchallenged. Side by side with organizing street demonstrations, it also took part in the presidential and parliamentary polls during the Zia-Sattar regime (1978, 1979, 1981), sometimes singly, sometimes by forming alliances with other parties. Awami League took these polls as an opportunity to solidify the party organization. Despite the implementation of a blueprint and a large-scale government intervention in the polls, Zia could not prevent Awami League from becoming the main opposition party in the Jatyta Sangshad. When General Zia brought the 5th Amendment Bill with a view to giving his military rule of 1975-79, Awami League opposed it vehemently both inside and outside the parliament. Awami League vociferously protested other anti-people and undemocratic moves taken by Zia government.

Towards the end of the Zia regime, Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina returned home from self-exile since the August tragedy. The day was May 17, 1981. Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana had left behind their parents, brothers and their wives and other relatives when they went abroad a few months before the August tragedy of 1975. When she returned home in 1981, his near and dear ones were no more. But she quickly got over the grief of losing her parents and dear ones like his little brother Russell and took the helm of Awami League. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to the reorganization of the party for starting a relentless and indomitable struggle for the restoration of democracy in the country and for the attainment of the rights of the people.

Awami League was reassured to find in her an intrepid, brilliant, dynamic leader was ready to go to any extent for the realization of the dreams of her father, the founder of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The party elected her its president and posited its confidence in her. she on her part soon became the rallying point of the toiling masses, the rightless, voiceless multitudes who were ophaned like herself at the death of Bangabandhu. Awami League was reinvigorated by her electrifyingly enthusiastic leadership and her far-reaching political visioin. On the day of her home-coming, it seemed as if Nature also mourned with her : it was a day that saw heavy downpour and thunderstorm in the city. In spite of the inclement weather, a million people turned out at the airport to receive the daughter of Bangabandhu with the warmth of their heart.

On May 30, 1981, General Ziaur Rahman died in an army putsch. Vice President Justice Abdus Sattar took office as

President, but within less than a year he was forced to resign by General Ershad who staged an army coup on March 24, 1982. Thus the long autocratic rule of General Ershad started which lasted for nine long years.

B. The Rule of General Ershad

On March 26, the Independence Day, after only two days of Ershad's assumption of power, Sheikh Hasina voiced her first protest against the autocratic rule in an address at the National Memorial at Savar. She vowed to restore democracy and pronounced a stern warning to Ershad. She made a similar pronouncement on January 21, 1983 to a huge gathering in front of Bangabandhu Bahaban in Road no. 32, Dhanmondi. The Ershad government quickly arrested her on charge of the violation of Martial Law and clamped a legal suit against her. Other political parties and their leaders kept silent during this time.

Sheikh Hasina felt the need for starting a concerted movement against Ershad's military autocracy. With that end in view she formed a 15 party Alliance in early 1983. The Alliance adopted a 5-point action programme, the main concern of which was the immediate withdrawal of military rule and the return of the army to the barracks and the holding of the Jatiyo Sangshad elections before any other polls. Four years passed, during which time a number of hartals were observed, a national convention was held in Dhaka etc. But the autocratic rule of Ershad still there. On May 7, 1986, Ershad announced the date for Jatiyo Sangshad election. Awami League thought it opportune to fight the election unitedly with other parties and alliances; but a few of the parties withdrew themselves at the last moment. 8 parties under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina took part in the polls jointly. This 8-party Alliance got 97 seats out of 300, and 31.21% of the total votes cast. (Awami League won 76 seats on its own and 26.15% of the total votes). In reality, Awami League-led Alliance was on the verge of winning a majority, but the results were hijacked by a media-coup. The declaration of elections results on the TV and the radio was suspended for 48 hours, during which time Ershad hijacked the popular mandate.

This incident exposed the true nature of Ershad regime to the outside world. The accumulated hatred of the people against Ershad's autocratic rule grew stronger as they understood that no free and fair polls were possible under the Ershad government. Accordingly, Awami League refrained from participating in the presidential election of 1986 and the Jatiyo Sangshad election of 1988 and the Jatiyo Sangshad election of 1988. As a result, these elections turned into a farce.

Awami League, however, continued to play its role as opposition party in the parliament right upto the dissolution of Jatiyo Sangshad in December 1987. Side by side with this, AL organized street demonstrations also. Awami League observed March 24, the day Ershad snatched power as 'Black Day'. When the Ershad Government made a bid to have the 'Zilla Parishad Bill' (with a provision of representation of the army) passed in the Parliament, Awami League members led by Sheikh Hasina staged a walk out (12 July, 1987). There were angry protests outside the house also, which forced Ershad government to retreat.

The final months of 1987 saw a strong anti-Ershad movement. On November 10, Awami League observed the 'Dhaka siege Day'. A worker of Awami Jubo League, Noror Hossain made himself a walking poster by having these slogans painted on his chest and back: 'Let Democracy be free' and 'Down with autocracy'. The police targeted him and killed him with a gunshot. The Ershad government was frightened by the public anger and the next day interned Sheikh Hasina in her own house. Quite a few leaders and activists of Awami League and its constituent organizations courted arrest in this new phase of movement against Ershad. Being freed from house-arrest, Sheikh Hasina went to Chittagong on January 24, 1987 to address a public meeting in Laldighi Maidan of Chittagong. On the way the truck carrying Sheikh Hasina to the meeting venue came under a sudden attack: the police and the paramilitary forces fired indiscriminately killing about 50 people on the spot. The main target of this infamous 'January 24 Genocide' was of course Sheikh Hasina herself. But by the grace of the Almighty her life was saved. The anti-Ershad movement rose to a crescendo during 1987. Ershad on his part, attempted a new strategy to quell the popular uprising: he dissolved the parliament and let loose a reign of terror on the opposition political parties. With a view to forming a 'rubber stamp' parliament, Ershad arranged for a farcical, voterless election on March 3, 1988. Almost all the parties boycotted the election. But Ershad managed to get the

notorious 'State Religion Bill' passed by the 8th Amendment of the Constitution in this 'rubber stamp' parliament. This bill struck a blow at the non-communal, secular foundation of the state of Bangladesh and the spirit of the glorious Liberation War. Awami League raised its voice of protest against the bill and organized demonstration all over the country.

When all the concentrated efforts made by various political parties, alliances and professional organizations came to naught, Sheikh Hasina came forward with a historic formula for Ershad's resignation in a mammoth meeting at Panthapath of Dhaka on November 6, 1990. She suggested that Ershad should quit after handing over power to a neutral non-partisan person under the articles 51 and 55 of the Constitution (this formula was incorporated in the 'Historic Formula of the Three Alliances of November 19'). Consequently and at long last, Ershad was forced to declare resignation on December 4, 1990. On December 6, he handed over power to neutral caretaker government headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Thus the 9-year long autocratic rule of General Ershad came to an end. In the ouster of the autocratic government of Ershad, Awami League and its various organs played the most seminal role.

C. The Rule of Begum Khaleda Zia

The Jatiya Sangshad election of February 27, 1991 under the neutral caretaker government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was a disheartening experience for Awami League. Everybody, both at home and abroad, had thought that Awami League would win an absolute majority and form the government. Even BNP anticipated their defeat, had started preparing for post-election agitation programmes. But the election results surprised all concerned. Awami League and its allies got more vote but less seats in the Sangshad (34.29% votes and 100 seats; AL by itself 88 seats); whereas BNP got less votes but won more seats (30.81% of votes and 140 seats).

The reasons were not far to seek. All the rightist political parties, the defeated forces of 1971, the beneficiaries of post-75 politics, the owners of black money, the collaborators of autocracy and their foreign patrons joined their hands in order to defeat Awami League. They used their black money and communal propaganda for the purpose. On top of that, BNP and Jama-ati-Islami made an electoral alliance and divided the seats among themselves. When all these conspiracies seemed to bear no results they took recourse to subtle rigging. The sure victory of Awami League was thus hijacked by BNP. It was a deep and far-reaching conspiracy of the reactionary quarters against Bangladesh Awami League, the undaunted champion of the hopes and aspiration of the people and the upholder of the spirit of democracy and Liberation War.

After the election, BNP formed the government with the assistance of Jamaat. Because of electoral understanding with BNP, Jamaat had managed to win 18 seats. BNP leader Khaleda Zia took oath of Office as prime Minister on March 19, 1991 and Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina took up the role of the opposition in the parliament. Even in this role, Awami League did not forget its electoral vows : it took initiative to introduce the parliamentary form of government which ultimately came into being through the 12th Amendment of the Constitution (August 6, 1991).

But the nation could not reap the fruits of parliamentary democracy for long. Despite being the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House in the Sangshad, Begum Khaleka Zia often absented here self from the parliament. The administration was shamelessly monopolised by the party in power; Khaleda Zia herself, her two sons, her siblings and other relatives, the ministers and the leaders-workers-supporters of BNP indulged in widespread corruption. They misappropriated thousands of crores of public money in order to enrich themselves overnight. The hoodlums of BNP were given arms with which they let loose a reign of terror all over the country. Murder, women and children abuse, acid throwing on girls became the order of the day. The hooligans of BNP-supported student organization turned every campus into a killing zone, the result being that all the university and colleges started to close down one by one. There was on unprecedented anarchy in the agriculture sector : 18 farmers were shot dead when they were demonstrating for fertilizers at a reasonable price. Similarly, 19, factory-workers were also killed. The people were soon disenchanted with the Khaleda government and thire disappointment and anger showed through the results of a by - election in Mirpur. Although the AL candidate won the poll, the Election Commission, at the behest of the BNP government, changed the results and declared the BNP candidate winner (February 3, 1993).

On January 30 1994, the BNP candidate for the Mayorship of Dhaka was defeated by the AL candidate. In order to take revenge for this electoral defeat, the BNP hooligans gunned down 7 innocent people at Lalbagh in the city. People from all walks of life protested this heinous 'Lalbagh Murder' and demanded the trial of the killers. Things started happening at a quick pace and the BNP government's popularity fell to zero. On March 20, 1999, a by-election was held for the Sangshad seat of Magura-2, which was a watershed in the political history of the country. BNP resorted to all-out violence, rigging and irregularity in order to hijack the popular verdict clearly by the voters in favour of the AL candidate. It was such an unprecedented and shameless rigging that the Election commission itself was rendered helpless : the Chief Election Commission flew back to Dhaka, seemingly in dismayed and shocked by the stupidity of it.

It became crystal clear through the Magura polls that a free and fair election cannot be held under a party- government : the only solution is to hold all national elections under a neutral caretaker government. With this end in view, the opposition parties in the Sangshad under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina tried to move a bill in the Sangshad. But it was impossible for BNP and Khaleda Zia to countenance such a proposal. On the contrary, Khaleda Zia rejected the opposition demand disdainfully, and declared, "None but a mad man or a child is neutral." After the Magura incident, all the political parties including AL chose to boycott all elections under the BNP government.

Sheikh Hasina, the President of Awami League and Leader of Opposition in the Parliament led a tumultuous mass-movement on the issue of neutral caretaker government and the attainment of the people's right to vote freely. The caretaker government issue soon became the national demand. As a part of the movement, Awami League and other opposition parties refrained from attending the sessions of the parliament (March 30-December 28, 1994) and finally, 146 MPs resigned their posts as members of Parliament. In spite of this, BNP tried to continue the Sangshad without the opposition parties for more than a year. Finally, on November 24, 1995, the BNP government dissolved the parliament and went for fresh polls. Thus Begum Khaleda Zia and her government had to quit before the expiry of its 5 year term.

A farcical election was held on February 15, 1996 with all the opposition political parties boycotting it. As the popular demand of holding the parliamentary polls under neutral caretaker government was turned down, the opposition decided to actively resist the polls. In the process of this resistance, 147 people were killed, thousands were wounded and more than 20 thousand AL workers were put behind the bars.

In the midst of nationwide protests, hartals and demonstrations, the illegally formed parliament was called to session. It lasted for only 4 working days. As the political situation of the country became extremely explosive, Khaleda Zia had to concede the demand for neutral caretaker government and had to pass a bill to that effect through the 13th Amendment of the Constitution (March 26, 1996). But the protesting public were not content in having anything short of the resignation of the Khaleda Zia government. Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the masses, called for an all-out movement for the cancellation of the February 15 election, resignation of Begum Zia government and the holding of a fresh parliamentary election under a neutral caretaker government. At the order of Sheikh Hasina, a countrywide non-stop non-cooperation movement started from March 9, 1996, Everything including the sea-ports of Chittagong and Chalna came to a stand still. She ordered the establishment of the 'Janatar Mancha' (Peoples Dias) in front of the National Press Club, Where people from all walks of life, including the officer and officials of the Secretariat assembled to show their allegiance to Sheikh Hasina and their solidarity with the on-going movement. In the face of the anti-Khaleda mass-upsurge, Begum Zia declared her resignation from power (March 30, 1996). The President appointed Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court as the head of the caretaker government.

On June 12, 1996 parliamentary election was held under a neutral caretaker government led by Justice Mohammad Habibur Rahman. Bangladesh Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina part in the election with 'boat' as the election symbol and won majority seats. Sheikh Hasina took the oath of office as Prime Minister on June 23. Awami League's was undoubtedly a significant event in our national history. Since the assassination of Bangladeshi Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the anti-Liberation and anti-people forces had spread their web of deceit and subterfuge, of conspiracy and subversion, in order to forestall Awami League's return to power. They had tried to bring back Pakistani ideals in every sphere of national life. But Awami League's much awaited and spectacular come-back put an end to all these nefarious designs and paved the way for the restoration of the spirit of Liberation War, democratization, alleviation of poverty, illiteracy and terrorism, effective prevention of torture, upon women and poor and the distressed. Moreover, this come-back opened up new vistas of possibilities for the restoration of the image of Bangladesh in the eyes of the world-community. It will also help the struggle for establishing a modern, affluent, self-reliant Bangladesh suited to face the challenge of the 21st century. Indeed, a new and an altogether different phase of the national struggle has started with Sheikh Hasina's assumption of office.

The Awami League government has already achieved a spectacular success in various spheres. Democracy has been given an institutional shape; the Sangshad has been made the centre of all activities; the transparency and accountability of the government have been ensured. Bangladesh under the sagacious leadership of Sheikh Hasina has signed a 30-year treaty with India to ensure a fair share of Ganges water for Bangladesh. The internecine, fratricidal conflicts in Chittagong Hill Tracts have come to an end following the signing of a peace treaty with the tribals there. Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina repealed the infamous 'Indemnity Act' and paved the way for the trial of the killers of the Father of the Nation, which was a clear realisation of its election pledge. The government of Sheikh Hasina has taken a number of epoch-making steps for the amelioration of poverty and for bringing smile to the face of the toiling millions. As a result of these, the country is now self-sufficient in food. Prices of necessary commodities have not risen during the past five years. The AL government has adopted a multilateral programme for removing poverty. This includes the pension schemes for the aged people, the divorced women and the widows, monthly grant of Taka 300 for disadvantaged freedom fighters; Employment Bank for the jobless, 'Asrayan Prakalpa' (a housing scheme for the houseless) and 'Santinibash' (homes for the aged) at every district headquarters. The deft way in which the government managed the devastating flood of 1998 also won the praise of the world community. The average per head income has risen from 280 US dollars to 386 US dollars. Literacy rate has risen from 44% to 62%. New industries and factories have been established a new export processing zones started functioning. There has been an increase in foreign investment also. In the field of games, Bangladesh has acquired 'test status'. In the cultural arena also, a new era has begun under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government.

In the international arena, Bangladesh has achieved several successes. The glorious Language Movement of 21st February has won recognition as International Mother Language Day. Among other notable achievements are Bangladesh's election as a member of the UN Security Council, the exchange of visit by the heads of government of Bangladesh and the USA, Bangladesh's election as the leader of the D-8 group, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's winning of the UNESCO Peace Prize and The Ceres Prize awarded by FAO. Bangladesh has acquired a place of honour in the comity of nations. Bangladesh is now known by its new image as a self-reliant nation with infinite prospects.

The governments that preceded the AL government of Sheikh Hasina had no definite policy in running the country. They believed only in looting and plundering the national wealth. They misruled the country with the assistance of the anti-Liberation elements on an adhoc basis. The AL government reversed the situation: from the very start it adopted realistic and pragmatic policies for an over-all development of the country. National Education policy, Industrial policy, Agriculture policy, Water policy, Forest and conservation policy, Investment policy and Health policy are some examples of the clear-sighted and progressive planning by the AL government.

Conclusion

Bangladesh Awami League is not merely a political party; it is a half-a century-old political institution also. The fate of Bangladesh and the Bangalee nation has been inextricably intertwined with this party. It has always upheld and fought for the democratic ideals and stood by the side of the toiling masses.

Our great leader, Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did his politics all for the betterment of the lot of the poor masses of this country.

After his sad death, the mantle has fallen on his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, who is carrying on the same fight as her father.