
Recovering

Nonviolent

History

Civil Resistance
in Liberation Struggles

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Bangladesh: Civil Resistance in the Struggle for Independence, 1948–1971

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Ebarer Sangram Amader Muktir Sangram, Ebarer Sangram Amader Shadinotar Sangram (This Struggle Is for Our Freedom, This Struggle Is for Our Independence).

—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, March 7, 1971

The Pakistani military in East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) surrendered to a joint command of the Mukti Bahini (Bengalis' Liberation Forces) and the Indian military in Dhaka on December 16, 1971, marking the end of a nine-month armed struggle for independence. The armed struggle had begun soon after midnight on March 25, 1971, when Pakistani forces launched Operation Searchlight against the Bengali civilian population in the major cities in East Pakistan, aiming to suppress the civil resistance launched on March 3, 1971.¹ The movement sought to force the government in Islamabad to honor the results of the first elections for the Pakistani National Assembly, held in December 1970, in which a Bengali political party, the Awami League (AL), had won an absolute majority.

When Pakistan was created as the homeland for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, Bengalis of East Pakistan—mostly Muslims—soon learned that religion was not a sufficient basis for Pakistani unity. Instead, the West Pakistani rulers disregarded Bengali political, economic, and cultural rights. Bengalis, 55 percent of the population, were underrepresented in the military and the civil service of the country and, economically, East Pakistan became more of an “internal colony” controlled and constrained by the

West Pakistani business class. Most alarmingly for the Bengalis, their culture became the subject of political attacks, being viewed as foreign and excessively influenced by Hinduism and India. The central symbol of this was the decision that Urdu would be the sole state language of Pakistan.

Throughout Pakistan's history, Pakistani rulers regarded Bengalis' demands for autonomy with suspicion. When the AL, led by Bengali politician Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (referred to in Bangladesh as Sheikh Mujib), won an absolute majority in the National Assembly elections in 1970, Pakistani military and civilian elites refused to hand over power and declared their intention to hold on to East Pakistan at any cost and by whatever means necessary.² The end result was the emergence of an effective and popular Bengali guerrilla counteroffensive, which ultimately led to the establishment of a new state in South Asia. Bengalis look back at armed resistance with great admiration—no doubt a part of the romanticized view of their nation's struggle for independence.³ "Bloody Birth of Bangladesh" proclaimed the cover of *Time* on December 20, 1971, with a photo of gun waving Mukti Bahini fighters celebrating.⁴

The armed resistance against Pakistan's military during March–December 1971 constituted a significant part of the struggle of the people of Bangladesh to achieve their independence. However, often overlooked is another critical factor—that ever since the establishment of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, time and again Bengalis had resorted to civil resistance and adopted many nonviolent methods to push for their own rights and self-rule. By taking a longer, historical view of Bengalis' struggle for independence, I focus in this chapter on the Bangla language movement and the nonviolent civil resistance movement of March 1971. Both movements were directed against a government, which repeatedly used violent means of repression against unarmed people. However, the resort to violence failed to strangle the movements, often backfired, and ultimately proved counterproductive in the face of massive nonviolent mobilization. These two movements are viewed as important "shapers" of Bengali national identity and "enablers" of the emergence of a quasi-independent East Pakistan by the time violent struggle broke out on March 25, 1971.⁵

Glorified Resistance in Arms and Remembrance of Fallen Heroes

In Bangladesh, armed resistance is a central focus of official and unofficial narratives of the independence struggle, which is often reinforced by national holidays that commemorate important military victories. The title of the official history of the country's independence struggle is *Muktijuddher*

Itihash (The History of the War of Liberation). A magnificent monument to honor fallen freedom fighters was erected in Savar, twelve miles from Dhaka, while in the capital itself the War of Liberation Museum attracts streams of visitors. Poems, short stories, and novels as well as school textbooks continue to depict the heroism of the Mukti Bahini. Films such as *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven) and *Arun Udayer Agni Shakhi* (Fiery Witness to the Sun Rise) are immensely popular, creating a glorified legend of armed resistance, while the musical *Payer Awaj Paoa Jai* (Footsteps Can Be Heard) has won international recognition. Literally thousands of songs have been written to honor freedom fighters. One of them is broadcast every night before the television news: “Shob Kota Janala Khule Dao Na, Ora Ashbe, Chupi, Chupi” (Open All the Windows, They Will Come, Silently, Silently). Another song that expresses the resolve of the Mukti Bahini is “Amra Ekti Phool Ke Bachate Juddho Kori” (We Fight a War in Order to Save a Flower).⁶

There are also commemorations for those who sacrificed their lives while leading nonviolent civil resistance, above all Ekushey February (February 21)—the day when a number of Bengali students who were part of the nonviolent language movement were killed by the Pakistani police and army. Ekushey February is both a national holiday and the day of celebration of Bengali culture and language. Since November 1999, this day has been observed by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as International Mother Language Day in tribute to the martyrs of the Bengali language movement and in universal recognition of people’s ethnolinguistic rights. Every year, Dhaka University organizes literary and cultural activities centering on the Shahid Minar (Monument for the Language Martyrs), adorning the roads leading to it with beautiful alpanas (traditional Bengali decorative colorful paintings). On Ekushey February, throngs of ordinary people, barefoot and singing the Ekushey song, “Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano Ekushey February, Ami Ki Bhuleti Pari” (I Will Not Forget My Brothers’ Blood Soaked Ekushey February), walk to the Shahid Minar and to the graveyard of some of those massacred. The Bangla Academy, set up in 1953, each year organizes a month-long Ekushey Book Fair.

Nevertheless, despite such commemorations, there seems to be a general lack of deeper reflection on the strategic value of nonviolent resistance in which students died. There are also few serious written contributions highlighting nonviolent methods used by the Bhasha Sainiks (language soldiers)—participants in the language movement.⁷ Although it is generally accepted that the Bangla language movement was successful despite violent repression, it did not lead directly to the independence of the country. Consequently, the strategic nonviolent actions that strengthened the independence struggle remain buried beneath the narratives of that struggle’s final phase, the 1971 armed resistance.

The Bangla Language Movement, 1948 and 1952

The first major political movement in East Pakistan demanded that Bangla be recognized alongside Urdu as a state language in Pakistan, arguing that Bangla was the native language of more than half the people of Pakistan and Urdu of less than 5 percent (although widely understood in East and West Pakistan).⁸ The language movement of 1948 and 1952 sparked the first widespread Bengali opposition to the government of Pakistan, dominated by the West Pakistan-based Muslim League party, and laid the foundation for the emergence of Bengali nationalism that played an important role in the subsequent struggles for independence.⁹

Even in the months before independence, there were signs of dispute among the West Pakistani and Bengali intellectuals as to the question of whether Urdu or Bangla should become the state language of an independent Pakistan.¹⁰ However, after independence (in August 1947), the Pakistani government promptly began using Urdu for currency, stamps, and other official papers. Bengali intellectuals were understandably alarmed that the government intended to make Urdu the state language without any public debate. Abdul Matin, an active participant of the Bengali language movement, records that by the end of 1947, whether by word of mouth or through newspapers, whenever the common people of East Pakistan learned about the controversy over the future state language, they expressed open support for the recognition of Bangla as one of the official languages of the country. They held demonstrations and meetings in towns and villages throughout East Pakistan.¹¹ Historian Ahmed Karmal, who notes that the first clash between rival supporters of Bangla and Urdu languages took place in Dhaka as early as December 12, 1947, also highlights the paradox of the widespread support for the language at a time when 85 percent of the population was illiterate.¹²

Although Bengali newspaper articles and debates among intellectuals raised public awareness about the language issue, it took grassroots organizing led or supported by a number of local leaders to get a nonviolent language movement off the ground. Beginning in 1947, groups of extraordinary men and women began to organize themselves, setting up various sociocultural organizations, which together with student groups and political parties became involved in the Bengali language movement as it unfolded in 1947–1948 and 1952. One of these organizations, Tamaddun Majlish, established in Dhaka in September 1947, made particularly significant contributions to the movement.¹³ At a time when the Pakistani authorities characterized the language movement as being driven by antistate and communist radicals, Tamaddun Majlish's general aim was unprovocative and noncontroversial—to “invigorate Islamic spirit and culture among the citizens of the new nation of Pakistan.” However, its activities soon proved to

be central in demonstrating that most Bengalis wanted Bangla to become a state language.¹⁴

Tamaddun Majlish published on September 15, 1947, an eighteen-page booklet, *Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla Na Urdu?* (Pakistan's State Language: Bangla or Urdu?), which contained three articles.¹⁵ This booklet played a significant role in defining clear objectives for the movement: that Bangla becomes, next to Urdu, a state language and in East Pakistan the main language of education, government offices, and courts (with Urdu as a second and English as a third language). It also stated that, if Bangla was not recognized as an official language of Pakistan, the people had a right to protest and obtain their rights—and, if necessary, through secession and independence—through a mass movement.¹⁶ Tamaddun Majlish organized meetings in schools, colleges, and throughout Dhaka in support of recognition of Bangla as a state language. The booklet gradually became an inspiration for scholars, teachers, other professionals, students, and, ultimately, the general public.

Tamaddun Majlish's prominent academics, politicians, and intellectuals—among others, Abul Kashem, Kazi Motahar Hossain, Abul Mansoor Ahmed, and Syed Nazrul Islam—played the key role in setting up the first Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad (RBSP; First State Language Movement Council) in October 1947. The RBSP provided the needed organizational structure for launching the language movement in late 1947 and early 1948. In addition, during 1947–1948 a number of prominent individuals and student and public organizations joined the Bangla language movement, including Gono Azadi League (People's Independent League) established in July 1947 and Gonotantrik Jubo League (Democratic Youth League) established in August 1947.¹⁷ Both organizations helped advance the language movement's demands by organizing various meetings and discussions.

A trigger for further mobilization was Dharendra Nath Dutta's motion to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on February 25, 1948, calling for Bangla to be given equal status with Urdu as a language of the state.¹⁸ Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan immediately dismissed Dutta's motion, insisting that Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan.¹⁹ The next day, the students at Dhaka University began to protest.

By now it became clear that Bengalis had to unite to press effectively for their demands, continuing to organize through civic activities but also building a platform of political support across party divisions. Therefore, on March 2, 1948, an All-Party Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad (All-Party State Language Council of Action, or All-Party Language Council) was formed in Dhaka, calling for an East Pakistan-wide strike to be held on March 11, 1948, to protest at the rejection of Dutta's motion ahead of the impending visit of the "Father of the Pakistani Nation," Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's first governor-general.

The main drivers behind the strike—the students and professors of Dhaka University—responded overwhelmingly to the call of the All-Party Language Council, and early in the morning on March 11, 1948, they gathered in large numbers at two of Dhaka’s residential areas, Nilkhet and Plassey Barracks, to urge the government and business office-workers to join the strike. Aiming to picket government officials, student leaders stationed themselves at both gates of the Eden Buildings (commonly known as the Secretariat—the seat of the provincial government) and were indeed joined by some officials. Others donated money, which was used later to make posters and banners.²⁰

Government officials from the Secretariat staged a walkout and soon were joined by workers and officials of the East Bengal Railway. When police broke up the demonstrations, a huge student protest meeting was held at Dhaka University and demonstrations spread throughout the city. Large numbers of people took up the All-Party Language Council’s call to strike in Rajshahi, Jessore, Khulna, Chandpur, Jamalpur, Noakhali, Dinajpur, Pabna, and Bogra, many demonstrating on the streets of their cities in a nonviolent display of force. Demonstrators were arrested and thrown into jails. In Dhaka, key leaders like Shamsul Huq, Oli Ahad, Sheikh Mujib, and Abdul Wahed were among those imprisoned. Separate cases were filed against Shawkat Ali and Qazi Golam Mahbub for their action to stop the car carrying the inspector general of police and the police superintendent at the Secretariat’s entrance gate.²¹

Under pressure from the ongoing strikes and demonstrations, Khawja Nazimuddin, the chief minister of East Pakistan, signed an eight-point agreement with the leaders of the All-Party Language Council on March 15, 1948. Its most important clauses were to submit a resolution to the next session of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in April to make Bangla one of the state languages and the official language of the province of East Bengal (in place of English) and give Bengalis the right to use their own language in competitive exams to the state administration. As part of the agreement, all arrested demonstrators would be freed on the same day.²²

When Jinnah arrived in Dhaka on March 18, he gave a series of speeches that proved to be of tremendous significance for the language issue—insisting that Urdu would be the only state language.²³ At his speech at Dhaka University, some students walked out while others shouted until he abandoned his speech and left the premises.²⁴ Having decided beforehand to meet with members of the All-Party Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad, he tersely told them that he rejected the agreement “signed under duress” by Chief Minister Nazimuddin.²⁵ In Jinnah’s view, a country as ethnically diverse as Pakistan needed a unifying language and Urdu was the appropriate choice as it was not the dominant language of any province, yet nevertheless was widely understood in both West and East Pakistan. Those in attendance argued that, if a language foreign to the majority was to be adopted, why not

accept English? They also pointed out that it was the democratic prerogative of the state legislature to decide on the language issue: an edict from the governor-general would be an undemocratic procedure. The meeting ended without agreement.²⁶

The government never implemented the March 15 agreement. Nonetheless, although the 1948 nonviolent mobilization did not achieve its main goal of making Bangla a state language, it was an important milestone. The mobilization demonstrated that the struggle would be long and difficult, that people had to be ready to make supreme sacrifices to win their rights, and also that if a movement is united and determined it cannot be crushed or disregarded by the authorities—all of which inspired Bengalis to continue their resistance in the years to come.

During 1950–1951, Dhaka University students began to organize themselves for further actions to advance the cause of Bangla.²⁷ In March 1950, they formed the Dhaka University Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Committee (Dhaka University State Language Action Committee). The committee raised funds from the general public and made posters informing people how much money they had collected.²⁸ The decision to be transparent about the committee's activities was strategic and helped mobilize other students. They also decided to distribute posters and leaflets encouraging people to commemorate the nonviolent demonstrations and strikes of March 11, 1950.

During the university break, students were asked to hold meetings in their hometowns in support of making Bangla a state language in schools, colleges, and libraries. The Action Committee circulated a memorandum among members of the Pakistani Constituent Assembly, calling for Bangla to be a state language. On reading this in the West Pakistani press, Bengalis living in West Pakistan wrote back to the Action Committee to pledge their support.²⁹

A new chapter in the movement began in January 1952 when Nazimuddin became Pakistan's new prime minister and reaffirmed that Urdu would be Pakistan's only official language. Immediately a new All-Party Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad was formed to organize and coordinate the protest movement. It declared a day of action—February 21, 1952—as Bangla State Language Day. The government, determined to thwart the protests, imposed Section 144 (a British colonial law) banning the gatherings of more than four people in and around the Dhaka University campus from the night of February 20. Key members of the Dhaka University Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Committee (Dhaka University State Language Action Committee) decided that they would not violate Section 144,³⁰ but many students were more defiant. Student activist Gaziul Huq recounts his experience:

Around 3 p.m. on 20 February while we were making a list of volunteers at Madhu's Canteen, we heard the government making microphone announcement declaring curfew [Emergency Act 144] for the following day

[21 February]. The students present resented the official enforcement of the Act 144 on the Bangla Language Day. Later that evening in a meeting at the Salimullah Muslim Hall [a students' dormitory] chaired by Fakir Shahabuddin it was decided that Act 144 would not be tolerated. It had to be broken. And this decision had to be passed on to the all party State Language Action Committee. Chaired by Abdul Momen another meeting was held in Fazlul Huq Hall and it was decided that Act 144 would have to be defied.³¹

All accounts of the students' meeting in front of the old Arts Faculty Building of Dhaka University on February 21 tell the story of courage and defiance by those gathered there. By noon, several thousand students assembled and shouted slogans like "Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai" (We Demand Bangla as the State Language). Shamsul Huq, representing the All-Party Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad, spoke first and called on students to not break Section 144. However, while Abdul Matin and Gaziul Huq from the Dhaka University Action Committee were making the case for defiance, the news arrived that police had used tear gas on a group of students in the Lalbagh area of Dhaka. The agitated students began shouting, determined to disobey Section 144. Yet they did so with a concern to avoid violence. Instead of leaving en masse, they numbered off into groups of ten, believing that this would help calm police while maintaining their own non-violent discipline. However, the peaceful nature of the protests was broken when the police began to charge with batons and fire tear gas—one tear gas canister knocked Gaziul Huq unconscious. Predictably, scuffles broke out and students began to throw stones and bricks.

The road in front of Dhaka University turned into a battlefield. Around 4 P.M., the police opened fire, killing five people—students Mohammad Salauddin, Abdul Jabbar, Abul Barkat, and two other people who had joined the protest, Raifquddin Ahmed and Abdus Salam. Scores of students were also injured. On February 22, thousands of people gathered at the Dhaka University Medical College and Engineering College for prayers before the burial of those killed in the police action. After prayers, people went to the streets to demonstrate, calling for Bangla to be a state language and for the chief minister of East Pakistan to be put on trial. Once again, police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. An angry crowd attacked pro-government newspapers. As the situation deteriorated, the government commanded the military to restore order. Some ministers fled the city and took shelter in the Kurmitola military cantonment.

The All-Party Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad called for a *hartal* (general strike) on February 25 to protest at the governmental repression while students erected a Shahid Minar at the place where Abul Barkat was shot and killed. Destroyed several times—the last time on the night of March 25, 1971—Shahid Minar became the rallying symbol for the Bengalis. On

February 24, 1952, full authority was given to the police and the military to restore order in Dhaka, leading to the arrest of almost all of the student and political leaders linked with the language movement. The following day, Dhaka University was closed for an indefinite period and students were told to leave university residences. In the face of such repressive measures, the movement lost its momentum in the capital, but it had already spread to other towns and the districts.

Chittagong—the second largest city of the province—became another important place for the mobilization of the Bangla language movement. When in January 1952 Prime Minister Nazimuddin reiterated that Urdu would be the only state language, an All-Party *Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad* meeting was held at the office of the Chittagong Awami Muslim League where members of other political parties, people from various professions, intellectuals, and representatives of trade unions were present. On February 21, news of the killings in Dhaka reached Chittagong that evening, arousing demonstrations and strikes. Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury instantly wrote a seventeen-page poem, “Not for Tears Have I Come but I Demand—They Be Hanged,” that was printed during the night. The police raided the printing press and confiscated materials, but not before 15,000 copies of the poem had already been distributed. On February 22, this poem was recited at a massive public rally at the Laldighi Maidan (Laldighi Field). People were simultaneously anguished and inspired by the words.³² February 21 was soon to be known as *Ekushey February*, following Gaziul Huq’s elegy, “We’ll never forget, never, *Ekushey February*,” which Altaf Mahmood (killed by Pakistani soldiers in 1971) turned into a popular song.³³

The Action Committee formed in the town of Mymensingh expressed its determination to continue the language movement in the district in a nonviolent manner. Peaceful demonstrations and strikes were organized. But when the local authorities using the State Security Act arrested two members of the local Action Committee and students of a local college, the situation deteriorated. As the police brought students to the court, the building was surrounded by thousands of people demanding their release. The protesters dispersed only after Action Committee member Abul Mansur Ahmed, whose two sons were among those arrested, assured the crowd that he would secure the release of the jailed students.³⁴

The language movement spread to many smaller towns in East Pakistan. In Barisal, for example, a five-member All-Party District Action Committee was formed in January 1952 and it organized processions and street meetings in February as well as distributed badges and posters.³⁵ On February 21, students from local schools and colleges formed processions that joined a mass rally at the Aswinikumar town hall. A mile-long demonstration moved from the town hall along the main roads of the town.³⁶ The news of the killings in Dhaka was brought in special issues of Dhaka daily

newspapers that were transported 100 miles by river. Spontaneous demonstrations of outrage and anger took place throughout the night of February 21, usually with women at the front. The next morning, a rally at the town hall was joined by villagers from neighboring areas. Later in the afternoon, thousands of people attended a memorial rally in honor of those killed in Dhaka. Again on the morning of February 23, the Namaj-e-Janaza (the Islamic ritual in honor of the dead) was attended by thousands. This civic mobilization in support of the Bengali language in Barisal was marked by its nonviolent nature and not a single violent incident on the part of the demonstrators took place.

Success of the Language Movement and Its Impact on National Consciousness

The people-driven Bengali language movement was remarkably successful, particularly in light of the repressive measures used against it such as police arrests, beatings, harassment, curfews, and killings by the military. The pressure generated by the movement forced the provincial government to introduce a motion on February 22, 1952, passed unanimously in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly, recommending that Pakistan's Constituent Assembly recognize Bangla as an official language of East Pakistan. The recommendation was not immediately implemented, but this and the larger objective of making Bangla an official national language of Pakistan was soon to be gained through conventional politics.

In the wake of Ekushey February, it became easy for opposition political parties in East Pakistan to form a United Front (UF), campaigning on the promise to make Bangla a national language and a language of instruction in the East Pakistani education system. In the first East Bengal Legislative Assembly election, held in March 1954, the UF decisively defeated the ruling Muslim League. Thereafter, Bangla was spoken in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly and used officially in the province. Ultimately, it was agreed that Pakistan's 1956 Constitution would recognize both Bangla and Urdu as national languages of the country.³⁷ These achievements were brought about by years of nonviolent mobilization and pressure by the language movement and its hundreds of thousands of supporters.

Bangladeshi writers widely recognize that the Bangla language movement was a defining moment in Bangladesh's history and laid the foundation for the development of Bangladeshi national identity.³⁸ The extraordinary participation of ordinary people in the 1951–1952 language movement offered its participants experience in sustained organizing and mobilizing; setting up support structures for leading protests and demonstrations; and, no less importantly, uniting, empowering, and educating people about their

right to their own language. Through their nonviolent collective actions combined with their determination and persistence in the face of violent repression, Bengalis' understanding of their own cultural separateness from the rest of Pakistan became more pronounced. Whether men or women, old or young, rich or poor, all through their participation and commitment shared the experience of struggling together, reinforced their collective desire to protect and use their own language, and formed their collective identity around Bengali language and culture.

Pakistani authorities' attempts to suppress nonviolent mobilization in support of the Bangla language backfired. Violence and repression used against the language movement increased Bengalis' emotional and psychological attachment and entitlement to the use of their mother tongue and intensified their national self-identification as distinct from being Pakistani. In that sense, the mass-based Bangla language movement established the language as a marker of Bengali nationalism and this became more important than the emphasis on Islam as the cohesive factor in Pakistani identity.

Between 1952 and 1971, many other factors, such as economic disparities between East and West Pakistan, continued discrimination in and limited access to Pakistan's civil and military services, and growing demands for expanded political autonomy further reinforced the collective consciousness of Bengalis. In aggregate, these factors contributed to a national consciousness and the desire for an independent state, which two decades later led to another unarmed insurrection in March 1971.

The Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Movement, March 1–25, 1971

Pakistan's first general election based on the principle of one person, one vote was held in Pakistan in December 1970. The Pakistan National Assembly had 313 seats, 169 of them in East Pakistan of which all but 2 were won by the Awami League, giving it an absolute majority. The AL's leader was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Active as a student in Calcutta in the struggle for independence from Britain, after Pakistan's independence he took part in the Bangla language movement of 1948 and 1952. For his role in that movement, he was imprisoned by the East Pakistan government. After General Ayub Khan's imposition of martial law in 1958, he served further prison terms. What now gave him heroic status, however, was a failed attempt by Ayub Khan to discredit Sheikh Mujib and thirty-four others by imprisoning them and putting them on trial for "conspiring" with India. This provoked massive protests and a wave of strikes, actions denounced by Ayub Khan as *gherao* (surrounding or besieging officials or employers) and *jalao* (burning buildings), and student protests. State violence did not quell resistance but

did arouse sympathy in West Pakistan, ultimately forcing the government to drop the prosecution and release the prisoners.

Sheikh Mujib's program was based on a six-point plan that he had introduced in 1966, aiming to revive the original vision of Pakistan as a federation of autonomous Muslim states. He proposed a new federation, with considerable self-government for East Pakistan, including its own currency, but with common foreign and defense policies. The plan was popular in East Pakistan and Bengali resentment at Pakistan's inadequate response to the 1970 Bhola cyclone (which hit East Pakistan and areas of India) assured the AL of a landslide victory. Hoping that the convening of the National Assembly in Dhaka on March 3, 1971, would be followed by the formation of the federal government under the leadership of AL, Bengalis expected that long-awaited political and social change would be finally realized.

On March 1, 1971, the final day of a cricket match between Pakistan, for the first time including a Bengali, and a Commonwealth team took place at Dhaka's stadium.³⁹ Before the match could break for lunch, the packed stadium roared in anger and people began throwing various items onto the field. The radio had just reported that President Yahya Khan had postponed the National Assembly session. The entire crowd poured out of the stadium and started moving toward Hotel Purbani, located nearby, where the AL leaders were working on the final draft of the constitution. Soon the cricket crowd was joined by officials from the Secretariat and retailers working in nearby commercial areas. Overflowing from the space in front of the Hotel Purbani, many moved on to Paltan Maidan, which was often used for large public meetings. Their slogans included calls to arms. Offices and shops around the stadium closed and there was an expectation among the members of the crowd that Sheikh Mujib would make an important announcement after his meeting with colleagues at the Hotel Purbani.

In a crowded press conference, Sheikh Mujib declared that he could not approve President Yahya Khan's adjournment of the National Assembly session. He came out with a program of action for the next six days, which included observance of complete *hartal* in Dhaka on March 1 and a province-wide strike on March 3, the date for the National Assembly to meet. Appealing for people to remain calm and peaceful while observing the strike, he warned that if government-controlled radio, television stations, and newspapers blocked news reports about the political movement in East Pakistan, Bengali staff should refuse to obey. Sheikh Mujib further announced on March 7 at the Dhaka Race Course that he would "announce the final program."⁴⁰ This immediately raised expectations that he would make a unilateral declaration of Bangladesh's independence.

On March 1, thousands of people gathered at Paltan Maidan where student leaders announced the formation of an Action Council and vowed to establish an independent Bangladesh. This was greeted with roars of support.

Dhaka and the rest of the province were completely shut down due to strikes between March 1 and 7. Bengali employees working in key public sectors refused to cooperate with their Pakistani employers. The Bengali staff of Pakistan International Airlines at Dhaka Airport refused to handle the flights from West Pakistan bringing Pakistan military personnel to East Pakistan.⁴¹ From March 1 onward, people went to the streets of all major cities and towns of the province, marching, chanting, and protesting. During the gathering of thousands of students in front of the western entrance to the Arts Faculty Building of Dhaka University on March 2, the protesters raised the original Bangladesh flag (a golden map of Bangladesh embedded in a crimson sun, bordered by green) and began chanting slogans such as “Joy Bangla” (Victory to Bengal), and “Bir Banglai Astro Dhoro, Bangladesh Shadin Koro” (Heroes of Bengal, Take Up Arms and Liberate Bangladesh). They pledged allegiance to the new flag while some students burned the Pakistani flag. The news of the raising of the Bangladesh flag spread quickly around the city. The military was deployed to the streets and clashes broke out between the demonstrators and the army in Dhaka, Khulna, Jessore, and elsewhere. Scores of unarmed protesters were killed between March 1 and 3 and there also were reports of army fire in Joydevpur, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet, and Rajshahi.

On March 3, at Paltan Maidan, Sheikh Mujib announced the launching of a nonviolent noncooperation movement in East Pakistan.⁴² Following this, every day from 6 A.M. until 2 P.M., nothing would move in the province. Public and private offices were shut down completely; buses, trains, and river and air transportation stopped operating; banks and all other financial institutions remained closed. Government television and radio stations based in Dhaka came under the control of protesting Bengali employees who formed Action Councils. They repeatedly played revolutionary and patriotic songs, including Rabindranath Tagore’s “Amar Sonar Bangla” (My Golden Bengal), which later became the national anthem of Bangladesh. “Jibon Theke Neya” (A Story Taken from Life), a banned film mirroring the autocratic nature of the Pakistani government, was finally shown on Dhaka television.

When the military authorities banned live broadcasting of Sheikh Mujib’s March 7 speech from the Dhaka station of Radio Pakistan, Bengali radio staff shut the station down, which posed the authorities with an acute dilemma. The radio station was located next to the Hotel Intercontinental that housed most foreign journalists and was near the Dhaka Race Course. The regime wanted the world to believe that—despite the *hartals* and disruption—business as usual would soon resume. If the speech was not broadcast, and if as a result protesters tried to occupy the station, then it would be clear to foreign press corps—and to the world—just how grave the situation was. Therefore, pressured by the Bengali radio staff’s noncooperation and the volatile situation, the regime allowed the speech to be broadcast live.

One of the least-mentioned actions during the period of disobedience was the spontaneous Bengali boycott of economic goods produced by West Pakistani-owned factories in East Pakistan. For example, Kohinoor Chemical products and cosmetics ceased to sell and, suddenly, Piva toothpaste and other cosmetic products produced by Bengali-owned Hena Chemicals became extremely popular. People also began using indigenously produced clothes from *khaddar* (made of cotton) material.

Awami League leaders were generally successful in maintaining the nonviolent character of the movement. They understood the strategic value of remaining nonviolent and, on a number of occasions, they showed their willingness to intervene decisively to stop violence. For example, some young AL leaders set up checkpoints at the Farm Gate area of Dhaka and searched passengers leaving for West Pakistan, hoping to find jewelry and cash. On one occasion, it led to violence. Following this incident, Sheikh Mujib ordered the checkpoints to be dismantled.

On March 5, Pakistani President Yahya Khan announced that he was convening a roundtable conference of political leaders on March 10 and a session of the National Assembly on March 25. AL leaders responded that they could not attend such events until independent investigations were conducted into the killing of civilians by the military since March 1. The entire province waited anxiously for March 7 when Sheikh Mujib was to address a public meeting at Dhaka Race Course. An estimated 3 million people attended.⁴³ Sheikh Mujib's eighteen-minute speech was politically shrewd. He did not declare outright independence, but made it clear that it was his ultimate aim. He laid down four conditions that had to be met before he would consider meeting with the Pakistani president: (1) withdrawing martial law; (2) returning troops to barracks; (3) investigating the killing of civilians; and (4) transferring power to the people's elected representatives, according to the results of the December 1970 elections.

The noncooperation campaign was to continue, but in a limited way so it could become more sustainable. Government offices, courts, and educational institutions were to be closed indefinitely except that, to ease hardship, workers were to collect their salaries, banks and government offices would open two hours daily to pay them, and transport would function normally "except for serving any needs of the armed forces." Money transfers outside East Pakistan were banned. "From today, until this land has been freed, no taxes will be paid to the government anymore." Sheikh Mujib warned against provocateurs, urged people to ignore the media if they failed to report the news from Bangladesh, and appealed to "brothers" in the armed forces to return to their barracks. "You are our brothers. I beseech you to not turn this country into a living hell. Will you not have to show your faces and confront your conscience some day? If we can peaceably settle our differences there is still hope that we can co-exist as brothers.

Otherwise there is no hope. . . . Give up any thoughts of enslaving this country under military rule again!" To his own people, he had a warning about how high the stakes were: "The people of this land are facing elimination, so be on guard. If need be, we will bring everything to a total standstill. . . . If the salaries are held up, if a single bullet is fired upon us henceforth, if the murder of my people does not cease, I call upon you to turn every home into a fortress against their onslaught. Use whatever you can put your hands on to confront this enemy. Every last road must be blocked."⁴⁴

From March 7 to 25, East Pakistan was virtually governed by the provisional government of AL. The civil service, police, even the judges acknowledged the authority of its directives. The chief justice of the East Pakistan High Court refused to administer the oath of office to the Pakistani government's newly appointed governor of East Pakistan, Lieutenant General Tikka Khan. Through such acts of nonviolent noncooperation and self-organization, East Pakistan became *de facto* self-ruled and independent.

On March 7, 1971, the people listened to Sheikh Mujib's speech at the Dhaka Race Course in complete silence, occasionally breaking into applause. Near the end of his speech, in an emotionally choked voice, he announced, "Ebarer Sangram Amader Muktir Sangram, Ebarer Sangram Amader Shadinotar Sangram" (This Struggle Is for Our Freedom, This Struggle Is for Our Independence). The crowd roared. His rallying cry of "Joy Bangla" that followed brought even more thunderous response. At this moment, the transformation of people into a nation, not through violence but through collective acts of nonviolent resistance, was complete.

Conclusion

The common narratives around Bangladesh's independence highlight the armed struggle of the Mukti Bahini (Bengali guerrilla force) and India's decisive military intervention in December 1971. These factors were important to the outcome of the struggle. However, as I have shown in this chapter, the nonviolent civil resistance of the Bengalis for their political and cultural rights, and ultimately for their independence, was equally significant. The nonviolent language movements of 1948 and 1952 earned Bangla its due recognition as one of the state languages of Pakistan. More importantly, these movements helped unite Bengalis by defining and strengthening their national consciousness and identity. This development of linguistically and culturally based nationalism, according to a number of Bengali scholars, laid the foundation for the creation of a nation-state.⁴⁵

The nonviolent movements, in 1948, 1952, and March 1971, were successful in part because they were not confined to the province capital of Dhaka. Civil resistance was a highly participatory form of struggle for a

wide variety of Bengalis in small towns and villages all over East Pakistan; people from all walks of life, generations, and socioeconomic backgrounds were part of the nonviolent struggle.

The nonviolent movements each applied a rich selection of well-coordinated methods of nonviolent resistance, including protest and persuasion, social noncooperation and economic boycotts, tax refusal, workers' and students' strikes, walkouts, marches, and demonstrations. Protesters also established effective channels of communication with people via newspapers, radio, and later television. By mid-March 1971, the methods of nonviolent resistance delivered de facto independence to Bengalis with banks and other financial institutions, educational organizations, government offices, courts, seaports, and airports all working under the Bengali authority.

Political, economic, and cultural aspects of the nonviolent struggles influenced the entire Bengali masses by shaping their identities to extend beyond a politically limited concept of East Pakistan's province, inspiring people to think and dream about their own language and their own independent state, and, finally, helping them to survive brutal, violent assaults that ensued in the period March–December 1971.

Notes

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1. For details of Operation Searchlight, see Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, 2nd ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 71–90.

2. Sydney H. Schanberg, "Pakistan Divided," *Foreign Affairs* 50, no. 1 (1971): 125.

3. In this chapter, "Bengalis" refers to people who at the time lived in East Pakistan or later Bangladesh and, unless otherwise specified, does not include Bengalis living in India or elsewhere.

4. "The Bloody Birth of Bangladesh," *Time*, December 20, 1971.

5. K. P. Karunakara, "East Pakistan's Non-Violent Struggle," *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 20, 1971, 650.

6. These films, songs, musicals, and stage-dramas are considered cultural icons in Bangladesh.

7. There are significant works on the movement such as Badruddin Umar's *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon O Totkaleen Rajniti* (East Bengal's Language Movement and Contemporary Politics) (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 1970); Abdul Matin's participant account *Bangali Jatir Uttso O Bhasha Andolon* (The Origin of Bengali Nation and the Language Movement) (Dhaka: Book Point, 1995); and, in English, A. M. A. Muhith's *State Language Movement in East Bengal, 1947–1956* (Dhaka: University Press, 2008). However, these are not studies about the use of nonviolent action.

8. Zillur R. Khan, *The Third World Charisma: Sheikh Mujib and the Struggle for Freedom* (Dhaka: University Press, 1996), 45; Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 12.

9. Ishtiaq Hossain and Mahmud Hasan Khan, "The Rift Within an Imagined Community: Understanding Nationalism(s) in Bangladesh," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 34, no. 2 (2006): 324–339.

10. See M. Waheeduzzaman Manik, "The Making of the Formative Phases of the Bengali Language Movement in the Early Years of Pakistan," www.globalwebpost.com/bangla/info/articles/manik_dhiren_early_years.htm, accessed October 10, 2010; "History of Language Day," www.nvo.com/ghosh_research/nss-folder/historyoflanguageday/, accessed October 10, 2010; and Rafiqul Islam, "The Language Movement: An Outline," www.bdsdf.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=21165, accessed October 10, 2010.

11. Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 9.

12. Ahmed Kamal, "A People's History of the Language Movement," *New Age*, February 21, 2008, 8.

13. Umar, *Purba Banglar Bhasha*, 20–21; M. A. Barnik, "The Proclamation of the Language Movement and Early Programmes," *New Nation* (Dhaka), February 21, 2009, 10. See also Manik, "Making of the Formative Phases."

14. M. Waheeduzzaman Manik, "History of Language Day," www.nvo.com/ghosh_research/nss-folder/historyoflanguageday/, accessed October 10, 2010.

15. The information contained in this paragraph is based on M. A. Barnik, "Proclamation of the Language Movement." Barnik commented on a booklet entitled *Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Na Urdu?* (Pakistan's State Language—Bangla or Urdu?) (Dhaka: Tamaddun Majlish, September 15, 1947). The three articles included in *Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Na Urdu?* are Abul Kasem's "Our Proposal"; Kazi Motahar Hossain's "State Language Problem of East Pakistan"; and Abul Monsur Ahmad's "Bangla Will Be Our State Language." For details see Barnik, "Proclamation of the Language Movement," 10.

16. Barnik, "Proclamation of the Language Movement."

17. Manik, "Making of the Formative Phases."

18. M. Waheeduzzaman Manik, "The Forgotten Harbinger of the Language Movement," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), February 23, 2010, 14. Dutta, a Hindu arrested in Gandhi's Quit India campaign, had opposed partition but opted to stay in Pakistan rather than move home. The first to formally demand recognition of Bangla, he later became East Pakistan's minister of health. He was arrested by Pakistani forces on March 29, 1971, tortured, and killed.

19. Rafiqul Islam, "The Language Movement: An Outline," www.bdsdf.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=21165, accessed October 10, 2010.

20. Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 18.

21. Ibid.

22. Islam, "The Language Movement," 2–3. The son of a language movement participant recalls that, when the authorities refused to free the leaders Shawkat Ali, Qazi Golam Mahbub, and Zakir Hossain, those activists who had already been freed returned to the prison and refused to leave until all leaders were released.

23. Philip Oldenburg, "A Place Insufficiently Imagined: Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985): 716.

24. Ibid.; Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 17. See also Quamruddin Ahmed, *Purbo Banglar Samaj O Rajniti* (East Bengal's Society and Politics), 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Inside Publishers, 1976), 107.

25. Details of the meeting between Jinnah and members of the All-Party State Language Council of Action are taken from Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 23–24; and Ahmed, *Purbo Banglar Samaj*, 107–108.

26. For further details of the meeting between Jinnah and members of the Action Committee on March 21, 1948, see Ahmed, *Purbo Banglar Samaj*, 107–108.

27. The descriptions are based on Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 21.
28. A fund-raising flag day involved offering donors small flags to pin on their clothes to show support for the cause of Bangla.
29. Matin, *Bangali Jatir Uttso*, 21.
30. Ibid., 23; Ahmed, *Purbo Banglar Samaj*, 120.
31. Tito Scohel, "Bangla Language Movement: 21 February, 1952," www.mukto-mona.com/new_site/mukto-mona/bengali_heritage/bangla_language_movement.htm, accessed October 15, 2010. The following account of events on February 20–21 is based on this source.
32. Hayat Mamud, "The History of Observance of Ekushey," http://21stfebruary.org/eassy21_8.htm/, accessed October 15, 2010.
33. Mamud, "The History of Observance of Ekushey."
34. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnir Panchash Bochor* (Fifty Years of Politics, As I Observed It) (Dhaka: Nowroj Kitabstan, n.d.), 318–319.
35. Eventually, the number of committee members increased to eighty-one, including many students and a number of women. See Mamud, "The History of Observance of Ekushey."
36. The description of the language movements in Barisal and Chittagong is based on information found in *ibid.*
37. Although the 1956 Constitution was abrogated two years later following a military coup led by General Ayub Khan, the 1962 Constitution reconfirmed Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan.
38. Manik, "Making of the Formative Phases."
39. The Commonwealth, set up in 1949, is a voluntary association of countries, currently consisting of fifty-four that are mainly former British colonies and territories.
40. *The People*, March 2, 1971, reprinted in *Bangladesh Documents* (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.), 190.
41. S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy* (Dhaka: University Press, 2006), 183.
42. Rafiqul Islam, *Ekti Phulke Bacahbo Bole* (To Save a Flower) (Dhaka: University Press, 1988), 31.
43. *Pakistan Observer*, March 8, 1971, quoted in *ibid.*
44. Full text of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech, www.albd.org/autoalbd/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=117&Itemid=44, accessed January 20, 2011.
45. For example, M. Anisuzzaman, "The Identity Question and Politics," in *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, ed. Rounaq Jahan (Dhaka: University Press, 2002), 45–63; and Habibul Haque Khondker, "A Pendular Theory of Nationalism," Working Paper Series No. 15 (Singapore: Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2003).

Appendix:

Conflict Summaries

This appendix has been compiled by the book's editor, Maciej Bartkowski, based on the information presented in the corresponding chapters of the book. Cases are arranged alphabetically. (Any omissions in the tables are either of the editor's own making or the information was not available.)

Key

Method and Type of Nonviolent Action

Nonviolent intervention

Disruptive

Creative

Noncooperation

Political

Economic

Social

Protest and persuasion

Length of the Campaign

Short: 1 day up to 4 weeks

Medium: 1 month up to 1 year

Long: More than 1 year

Level of Participation of People

Low: 1–100 people or less than 20 percent of the population

Medium: 100–1,000 people or between 20 percent and 50 percent of the population

High: More than 1,000 people or more than 50 percent of the population

Bangladesh

Main Campaigns	Action	Method/Type	Date	Length	Level of Participation	Direct Impact	Long-Term/Overall Impact of Civil Resistance
Bangla language movement, 1948–1952	Setting up sociocultural organizations	Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	1947–1948	Long	Medium	They offered an organizational structure for the language movement and mobilized Bengalis in their struggle for Bangla to become a state language	Nonviolent struggles influenced the entire Bengali population by shaping its national identity beyond a politically limited idea of East Pakistan’s province, inspired people to think and dream about their own language and to long for their own independent state
	An 18-page booklet “Pakistan’s State Language: Bangla or Urdu?” was published	Protest and persuasion	September 15, 1947	Short		The booklet defined objectives for the Bangla movement and became an inspiration for Bengalis	
	Demonstrations	Protest and persuasion	1947	Short	High	Under popular pressure, the chief minister of East Pakistan signed an eight-point agreement, including a clause on a resolution to make Bangla one of the state languages and the official language of East Bengal Province	
	Strikes	Noncooperation/ <i>Economic</i>	1947	Medium	High		
	Protests after the eight-point agreement was rejected	Protest and persuasion	February 25, 1948	Short	High	Maintaining momentum of the language movement	
	All-Party State Language Council of Action formed in Dhaka	Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	March 2, 1948	Long		Building a platform of political support across various parties and political groups The Council called for an East Pakistan–wide strike on March 11, 1948	
	Strike	Noncooperation/ <i>Economic</i>	March 11, 1948	Short	High	Students and faculty of Dhaka University joined the strike, picketed the provincial government, and urged government workers and businesspeople to join the strike Strikers collected money, which was used later in making posters and banners	
	Government officials from the provincial government staged a walkout	Noncooperation/ <i>Political</i>	March 1948	Short	High	Government officials were joined by workers of the East Bengal Railway Police tried to break up demonstrations that spread throughout the city	
Bangla language movement, 1948–1952	Dhaka University State Language Action Committee set up	Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	March 1950	Medium		The committee mobilized students, raised public funds, and distributed posters and leaflets encouraging people to commemorate March 11 and circulated a memorandum demanding Bangla as a state language	Nonviolent struggles influenced the entire Bengali population by shaping its national identity beyond a politically limited idea of East Pakistan’s province, inspired people to think and dream about their own language and to long for their own independent state
	New All-Party State Language Council of Action formed	Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	January 1952	Medium	High	Coordinated protests and called for demonstrations on February 21	
	Student protests	Protest and persuasion	February 21, 1952	Short	High	Police opened fire, killing five people, and injuring many others Thousands gathered and prayed at the university campuses for those killed in demonstrations	
	Funeral homage for killed protesters	Protest and persuasion	February 22, 1952	Short	High	Police again opened fire Ongoing protests forced the provincial government to introduce a motion calling for the recognition of Bangla as an official language of East Pakistan	
	Students erected Shahid Minar (Monument for the Language Martyrs)	Protest and persuasion; Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	February 1952	Short	High	Shahid Minar became a powerful rallying symbol for Bengalis	
	General strike	Noncooperation/ <i>Economic</i>	February 25, 1952			Police detained student and political leaders of the language movement Dhaka University was closed by the authorities Protests and demonstrations spread to other towns	
Nonviolent civil disobedience movement, March 1–25, 1971	Public demonstrations followed after Awami League was denied its national electoral victory	Protest and persuasion	March 1, 1971	Short	High	Military deployed, attacking and killing demonstrators Bengalis began calling openly for independence	
	Announcement of <i>hartal</i>	Protest and persuasion	March 1, 1971	Short	High		
	Province-wide strike	Noncooperation/ <i>Political</i>	March 3, 1971	Short	High		
	Flag raising	Protest and persuasion	March 2, 1971	Short	High		
	Formation of Action Councils	Nonviolent intervention/ <i>Creative</i>	March 1 and 3, 1971	Short	High		
	Boycott of economic goods produced by West Pakistani–owned factories in East Pakistan; shutdown of public and private offices, buses, trains, river and air transportation, banks and all other financial institutions; and refusal by television and radio stations to follow censor’s orders	Noncooperation/ <i>Political, Economic, Social</i>	March 3, 1971	Short	High	As a result of the boycott, cosmetic products produced by Bengali-owned Hena Chemicals became extremely popular People began using indigenously produced clothes from <i>khaddar</i> (hand-loomed cotton) Through acts of noncooperation, East Pakistan became de facto self-ruled and independent before the armed invasion by West Pakistan	
	Three million people attended public gathering at the Dhaka Race Course	Protest and persuasion	March 7, 1971	Short	High	Articulation of the demands and visualization of the national movement	