

Alliance Politics in Pakistan: A Study of the United Front

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Abstract

Political parties which wish to exercise power in parliamentary democracy are typically forced to enter into an alliance. These parties can either form a pre-electoral coalition prior to election or they can compete independently and form a governmental alliance afterwards. Pakistan started its political journey as parliamentary democracy. Muslim League, a political party that struggled for and won freedom for the Muslims of the Subcontinent, was ruling party in those early years. Gradually this party lost its popularity among masses, especially in the Eastern wing. When the Central Government announced elections for East Bengal Legislative Assembly the opposition parties united against the League and formed a pre-electoral alliance called United Front. This alliance was heterogeneous one, comprised of four parties on right-centre-left. Different positions of parties on political chessboard made it a difficult and complex arrangement but allies' strategy proved so effective that they routed the League in elections. The new ministry under Fazlul Haq assumed power but soon the Central Government dismissed it on charges of administrative inefficiency and irresponsibility. The Front went in hibernation afterwards. After the dissolution of the First Constituent Assembly of Pakistan the alliance revived its political activities but these activities contributed to its termination. Within two years of its formation the alliance had evaporated in the air.

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This paper describes and analyses the politics of United Front and its impact on subsequent events.

Introduction

Forming political alliances is a process of organizing parties collectively in pursuit of a common goal or objective. The elements or actions that entail this process include among others the pooling of resources, forming binding commitments and an agreement on the distribution arrangement of the product that may result from achieving this goal. A political alliance is a “temporary combination of groups or individuals formed to pursue specific objectives through joint action”.¹ In other words, it is “the union of different political parties or groups for a particular purpose, usually for a limited time.”²

Party alliances may be forged either by giving serious considerations to ideological positions of respective parties on political chessboard or by ignoring them altogether. The precise actors that make up such political alliances consist mainly of individual legislators and political parties seeking purposely to control the executive. But this does not mean that alliances are not forged for any other purpose. They are also formed to safeguard the interests of smaller parties by providing them representation in the legislature, to overthrow a government, to protect the opposition from the repression and pressure of the government or to struggle for democratization.

In multi-party systems no single party can win a majority of seats. The necessary majority forms of political alliance may normally occur in two ways. One, pre-electoral alliance occurs before the elections and is made openly with the goal of informing the public about what the parties will do if they win enough seats. Two, post-electoral alliance formed after the elections when the

1 Motlemelle Anthony Kapa, “The Politics of Coalition Formation and Democracy in Lesotho,” *Politikon* Vol.35, No.3 (2008), pp.339-56; available from <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a91313642~fulltext=713240930~frm=content>; Internet accessed 8 February 2008.

2 Arthur Lupia and Kaare Strom, “Coalition Governance Theory: Bargaining, Electoral Connections and the Shadow of the Future,” (Universitat De Barcelona 15 September 2003); available from http://www.ub.es/grepa/Strom_Lupia.pdf; Internet accessed 12 January 2009.

final distribution of seats or votes is known. In this case no explicit information about coalition membership or leadership is given to the public before elections. This type of alliance may also occur when the previous government has failed but new elections have not been called. In such situations bargaining occurs between different parties capable and interested in potentially forming a governmental alliance.³

Alliances are also structured by smaller parties in post-colonial states purely for the sake of their survival. In countries where dominant party system emerges the smaller parties enter into alliances to increase the chances of their success in elections. Thus, they send a message to the electorate that they are alternate to the incumbent. India and Ireland have been ruled by dominant parties for quite long time. Their positions were finally challenged by coalitions of smaller parties. During the first few years the Muslim League also enjoyed the dominant party status in Pakistan. The formation of the United Front was an attempt on the part of minor parties to throw the League out of power.⁴

Alliances between parties vary greatly in form and degree. Some are short-lived and unorganized while others are strongly organized and lasting. Organized and lasting alliances, usually formed by ideologically identical parties, may stay intact for quite long time by preserving their unity in all situations. The unorganized alliances, product of ideologically distant parties, disintegrate soon as a result of confusion and clash of interests between the allied parties. The former type of alliance portrays itself as a durable and stable body while the latter type presents itself as a fragile and ephemeral entity.⁵

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- 3 Shambana Karume, "Conceptual Understanding of Political Coalitions in South Africa: An Integration of Concepts and Practices," in *The Electoral Institute of South Africa Round Table on Political Party Coalitions: Strengthening Democracy Through Party Coalition Building Held in Cape Town 19 June, 2003*, available from http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/ppr_southafrica.pdf; Internet accessed 31 July 2007.
 - 4 M. Rafuque Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1947-1958*, Vol. I (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1986), p.115.
 - 5 Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 2000), p.324.

Soon after independence Pakistan encountered with alliance politics. The politics had far reaching impact on the future course of its national life. The United Front (UF), the first conglomerate of political parties in the country, was a trend setter in this regard. This paper seeks to record the politics of the United Front, a pre-electoral alliance, formed in 1953 to contest elections held for the East Bengal Legislative Assembly. The key questions addressed in this paper are: Why and how the United Front was formed? How did it function? What role did it play in the national politics? Why and how did the United Front wither away?

The paper is broken down in five main components: introduction to politics of alliances, alliance formation (a brief description of parties, ideological orientation and formation attempts made for the United Front), its functioning (a narrative and analysis of electoral campaign, a snapshot review of election results and governance), termination (factors and process in termination) and finally conclusion.

Formation

After independence the Muslim League's lack of experience to run democratic institutions and policy of marginalisation of certain key political figures produced many disgruntled elements that formed opposition.⁶ The failure of League to satisfy the masses and sidelining those who were opposed to its policies cost her heavily. She lost some very capable and influential leaders along with their supporters. Suhrawardy was one of those skilful and popular leaders who felt that the League's ruling clique had failed to accommodate political aspirants to play their role in national politics. Soon he obtained the central position as leader of the opposition in both wings of the country. Most important disgruntled figures that joined him in those early days included Pir of Manki, Ghulam Muhammad Khan of Lundkhwar and Pir Zakori from NWFP, Nawab Mumdot and Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan from Punjab, Mehmud-ul-Haq Usmani from Sindh and Maulana Bhashani, Ataur Rehman Khan and Mujeeb-ur-Rehman from East Bengal. This led to the formation of All Pakistan Awami Muslim

6 Afzal, *Political Parties*, pp.86-88.

League, which later became a popular political party of opposition.⁷

During elections for the Provincial Legislative Assemblies of western wing of the country, the Awami Muslim League was not given a level playing field by the then rulers. Even Suhrawardy, the party head, was not allowed to campaign freely for his party. As a result of heavy handedness of the administration the Awami Muslim League could not produce desired results. She got very limited representation in the legislatures of West Pakistani provinces.⁸ The interference of the administration in provincial elections led Suhrawardy to focus on East Bengal and challenge the League from there. Bengali grievances provided him a fertile ground to carry out his activities and to advance his party agenda. During this period the Awami Muslim League developed a wide organizational base.⁹ The prominent figures of East Bengal who were disappointed by the Muslim League rule had already joined Awami League, but those who were not interested in joining her decided to form political parties of their own. Gradually, new opposition political parties cropped up on the scene. Some of them later agreed to form a united front against the Muslim League to contest forthcoming elections. The simple majority single ballot system and dominant position of the League were main factors responsible for formation of the United Front.

Constituent Parties

The Central Government had finally decided to hold general elections for the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in early 1954. This resulted in the hectic political activities in the province. Political parties began mending their fences, preparing their manifestoes and touring the province for electioneering purposes.¹⁰ The parties that challenged the League's authority by forging the United Front were as follow:

7 Cesar P. Pobre, "History of Political Parties in Pakistan (1947-1958)" (Ph. D. Thesis, University of Karachi, 1970), p.148.

8 *Ibid.*, 147.

9 Afzal, *Political Parties*, 93.

10 Pobre, "History of Political Parties," p.154.

The Awami Muslim League (AML): The AML was the leading opposition party with widest organizational base. Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy was its central leader while Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani led the party in East Bengal. He served as the President of East Pakistan Awami Muslim League with Mujib-ur-Rehman as its General Secretary. It attracted in its fold Bengalis from all walks of life. Besides its own organizational network, it had subsidiary bodies of supporters. The Awami Muslim League also enjoyed support among the lawyers, journalists, government servants, businessmen and peasants.¹¹

The AML in its session of 3-5 July 1953 adopted its election manifesto. Its forty-two-point manifesto included sensitive issues such as adoption of Bengali as national language, the nationalization of jute trade, the provincial share in revenue and development funds, the Bengali representation in the services and provincial autonomy. Its aggressive advocacy of these issues contributed to its province-wide popularity but also brought it into conflict with the government. Frequent imprisonment of its leaders only advanced their parochial proclivities.¹²

Krishak Sramik Party (KSP): The KSP was formed on 27 July, 1953 by A.K. Fazlul Haq after resigning from the office of Advocate General of East Bengal. Haq became its founder president. It was founded at a meeting of political workers held at his residence. The KSP announced its twelve point programme on 29 July, 1953. The programme included release of political prisoners; Bengali as a national language; full provincial autonomy on the basis of Lahore Resolution; reorientation of the education system, economic development etc. A distinguishing feature of its programme was its religious orientation adopted in cooperation with Nizam-e-Islam Party. As a conservative leader Haq developed close liaison with religious leaders though himself was a regionalist and talked for labourers and peasants.¹³

11 M. Rafique Afzal, *Pakistan: History and Politics 1947-1971* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.125.

12 *Dawn* (Karachi), 10 July, 1953.

13 Salim Yunus, *Syasi Ittihaad aur Pakistani Syasat per Asarat (1947-1990)*[Urdu: Political Alliances and the Impact on Pakistani Politics] (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1993), p.48. See also *Dawn* (Karachi), 30 July, 1953.

Nizam-i-Islam Party (NIP): The NIP was a new name of East Bengal JUI which, under the leadership of Maulana Athar Ali, decided to participate in politics directly. Its primary aim was to struggle for an Islamic order in Pakistan.¹⁴

The dismissal of the Nazim-ud-Din ministry (April 1953) and the fear of an un-Islamic constitution being imposed, as well as the mounting opposition to the Muslim League, induced it to function as a political party, independent of Muslim League, and to contest the elections as such. Its main aim was to exert influence on constitution making process that would lead to the establishment of an Islamic order based on Quranic principles; but in other matters, like the language issue and provincial autonomy, it followed the lead given by the opposition parties.¹⁵

Ganatantri Dal (GD): The non-communal left oriented the GD's foundation was laid at a convention on 19 January, 1953, attended by about one thousand political workers. Mehmud Ali was its moving spirit. He was supported by Haji Muhammad Danish, a legendary peasant leader. The latter was elected president while the former as general secretary of the party.¹⁶

The party manifesto attacked the Muslim League for its vested interests and reactionary views and stressed upon the need of social, political and economic changes in the country. Its ten point programme demanded the abolition of *zamindari* system without compensation; release of political prisoners; establishment of civil liberties, adoption of Bengali as a national language; equal rights for women in social, political and economic spheres, the abolition of visa system between India and Pakistan, nationalization of jute trade and an independent foreign policy.¹⁷

The Dal was the first party to open its doors to non-Muslims on equal footing and to demand a secular constitution. Because of

14 Afzal, *History and Politics*, p.126.

15 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.114.

16 Zarina Salamat, *Pakistan 1947-1958: An Historical Review* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1992), p.120.

17 K.K. Aziz, *Party Politics in Pakistan 1947-1958* (Islamabad: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, 1976), p.133. See also *Dawn* (Karachi), 29 November, 1953.

its radical outlook, it was associated with the communist party. Its offices were often searched and ransacked.¹⁸

Alliance Formation

The League's unpopular governance not only swelled the opposition ranks but also added to its (Muslim League) fear of defeat in East Bengal's elections. This fear had been compelling the League's leadership since 1951 to postpone elections for East Bengal Provincial Assembly. This delaying tactic could not be used as permanent solution of the problem. Towards the end of 1953, the government of Pakistan announced that an election to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly would be held early in the following year. Hectic political activity followed at once in that province, and all the opposition political parties thought of combining to throw off the yoke of Muslim League.¹⁹

The strength of the opposition forces became evident during the second half of 1953 in the form of several opposition parties gaining more and more public support. Of all these parties Awami Muslim League had the widest organizational base, but by itself still was not confident to defeat the Muslim League. Other opposition parties also realized that in the presence of simple majority single ballot system, by contesting elections on separate platforms, they would dissipate each others' resources and thus pave the way for League's victory. Ruling party's pressure and fear of its repressive measures to eliminate the opposition also worked as a factor in formation of the United Front. Suhrawardy's West Pakistani experience persuaded him and the leaders of other parties to form an electoral alliance and pool their resources together to avoid the repetition of what had happened in West Pakistan earlier.²⁰

The idea of an electoral alliance was initially mooted by the Democratic Youth League and the East Pakistan Communist Party to contest elections against the Muslim League (ML) in September 1952. The Progressive Student Federation had also started campaign in favour of the formation of the alliance against the

18 Salamat, *Historical Review*, p.121.

19 Aziz, *Party Politics*, p.104.

20 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.115.

League.²¹ The Ganatantri Dal at its inception also felt the need of formation of pre-electoral alliance.²² The idea was gradually embraced by other opposition parties. After reviving his old Krishak Praja Party with a new name (Krishak Sramik Party), A.K. Fazlul Haq pleaded for the formation of united front of all opposition parties with a common minimum programme for the purpose of the coming general elections.²³ The Awami Muslim League, however, was not keen about forging an electoral alliance with the KSP of A. K. Fazlul Haq. But there was a strong pressure on both the parties to form alliance. They finally consented to pooling their resources together in a common front against the Muslim League. Through a resolution moved in the meeting of its Council held at Mymensingh on 14-15 November 1953, the Awami Muslim League also expressed its willingness to form a united front in collaboration with the like minded parties to smash the ruling Muslim League. The party authorised Suhrawardy and Bhashani to conduct negotiations on the matter.²⁴

Forging a pre-electoral alliance of opposition parties was a difficult venture because of personality differences between Suhrawardy and Haq and Bhashani and Athar Ali; and programme differences between parties like GD and NIP. By November 1953, all parties based in East Bengal had separately expressed the desirability and need for a United Front with a “common minimum programme”, and they had empowered their respective leaders to negotiate terms. These party leaders were also under constant pressure from the public, especially the student community, to form a pre-electoral alliance.²⁵

Heads of almost all political parties had met one another secretly to reach on some agreement. Initially they wanted like minded parties to be selected as partners but later on they neglected this requirement. Maulana Bhashani and Fazlul Haq

21 Muhammad H.R. Talukdar, *Suhrawardy Ki Syasat Bitee*, Trans. Wajahat Masood (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1992), p.76.

22 *Dawn* (Karachi), 29 November, 1953.

23 *Ibid.*, 8 September, 1953.

24 *Ibid.*, 17 November, 1953.

25 Allen McGrath, *The Destruction of Pakistan's Democracy* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.110. See also Afzal, *Political Parties*, pp.115-16.

announced on 4 December, 1953 that their parties had united together on the basis of “common minimum programme” to defeat the ML in the elections. The decision to form the alliance that was called the United Front had followed the secret meetings held between the two leaders earlier. They declared on that occasion that machinery for contesting the elections would be soon set up and a detailed programme worked out.²⁶

A series of earlier and later secret negotiations between the AML and the KSP leadership resulted in the signing of a document by Ata-ur-Rehman (AML) and Kafil-ud-Din (KSP) on behalf of their respective parties. The document contained the twenty one point programme that was worked out by the allies. Summarising the principal Bengali grievances and demands, it addressed its appeal to all sections of Bengali society. The demand for the adoption of Bengali as a national language topped the list. Other important demands included: nationalization of jute trade; declaration of 21 February as an official memorial day; erection of a memorial for martyrs of the language movement; release of political prisoners; repeal of Safety Acts; and establishment of full regional autonomy for East Pakistan, giving the centre only three subjects—Defence, Foreign Affairs and Currency. In defence, Naval Headquarters were to be located in the eastern wing, and to make that wing self-sufficient in defence an armament factory was to be established.²⁷

When agreed on twenty one point programme, the KSP and the AML leadership held separate talks with the NIP and the GD. Haq signed a separate ten-point agreement with Athar Ali, the NIP’s president, after secret talks whose provisions virtually negated the twenty one point programme. The AML held talks with the GD and got its support for twenty one point programme and thus associated it with the alliance.²⁸ By the time of the elections, the generally accepted member parties of the United Front were the AML, the KSP, the GD and the NIP.

26 *Dawn* (Karachi), 5 December, 1953.

27 *Ibid.*, 20 December, 1953.

28 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.116.

Functioning

The most difficult phase in the United Front's life began after formation. At the stage of functioning the allies were expected to maintain their unity. Initially they neglected all their policy and individual differences and concentrated on the achievement of their main objective (electoral victory). As first step towards that end the United Front launched a vigorous electoral campaign.

Electoral Campaign

For running a successful electoral campaign the allies had not only to agree on the number of seats allocated to each partner to contest the elections but also to focus on the issues agreed upon in common minimum programme to avoid historical, ideological and other differences between the coalition partners. They needed common institutions to direct the propaganda of allies and supervise the implementation of agreements but due to lack of experience in coalition politics they could not evolve such institutions.

The leadership of the United Front, however, evolved a very successful and effective strategy to campaign for victory in the forthcoming elections. The campaigners of the Front focused principally on weaknesses of the Pakistan Muslim League. The leadership of the alliance criticised and held the League responsible for every ill. The allies conveyed their message to the people through rallies, public meetings, posters, banners and press statements. Press and radio were under government's control; therefore, they gave little or no coverage to the opposition activities. Print media occasionally gave some space to the United Front's viewpoint²⁹ while the radio was totally out of its reach. But in spite of these limitations the front successfully managed to approach and communicate its message to the people. Public meetings, rallies and political workers were main propaganda tools of the United Front. The Front had selected issues that appealed to the peoples' genius. Its attempt to exploit peoples' grievances

29 While surveying the literature on the United Front the writer observed that print media was totally in government's control. Most of the newspapers gave little coverage to the opposition viewpoint. The same papers propagated ruling party's programme and agenda generously.

proved fruitful. The following discussion sheds light on the strategy and issues raised in electoral campaign by the contestants.

The United Front had taken very aggressive start by criticising the Muslim League and its maladministration. The Front presented itself as an alternate to the Muslim League. The UF started its electoral campaign with the demand of dissolution of East Pakistan Ministry and installation of an all party caretaker interim government to ensure fair and free elections. This demand was a part of the Front's strategy to keep the League defensive from the very beginning. However, later on this demand was dropped and other sensitive issues like language, constitution, independent foreign policy, provincial autonomy etc. were focused. The opposition's public meetings were mainly addressed by the heads of constituent parties. They were popular political figures in East Bengal. League's loss of contact with the masses and the state language became the major subjects of their speeches. They criticised League for using delaying tactics in framing the constitution. The front alleged that the League was harping on the tune of Islamic Constitution and resolution of Kashmir dispute just to deceive the masses. They believed that she, in fact, used these problems as excuse for its inaction.³⁰

The League's campaigners, in response to the United Front's offensive, appreciated achievements of their party. In their public meetings they used to begin with criticism on the United Front and then highlighted the contribution made by their party in the national life of the country. They declared that opposition parties by uniting under a joint front had made it clear that their only aim was "to destroy" Pakistan. In their view the UF was comprised of the enemies of Pakistan who not only wanted to weaken the PML but also to deprive the people of the constitution based on Quran and Sunnah. They presented the League as guaranty of Islamic way of life and unity of the country while the UF was projected as opponent to these ideals.³¹ The Leaguers blamed that the Front had attracted in the fold those who never believed in Pakistan and had opposed the Quaid in his struggle for Pakistan. To these leaders

30 *Dawn* (Karachi), 18 December, 1953.

31 *Ibid.*, 15 December, 1953.

“every vote against the League would go against Islam and Pakistan”.³²

On the other hand, the opposition focused on those issues that had appeal for the electors. She criticised the Basic Principles Committee’s report and the Bogra Formula which in its view didn’t fully safeguard interests of majority. The Front’s leaders claimed that language issue would be resolved by the opposition only because the League had no interest in doing so. They also demanded dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and its elections on the basis of adult franchise. The Front blamed the PML leadership for its non-seriousness and failure in framing the constitution for Pakistan.³³

Suhrawardy, Fazlul Haq, Maulana Bhashani, Maulana Athar Ali and Mehmud Ali were important campaigners of the United Front. The Front’s sympathisers and supporters from West Pakistan had also toured East Pakistan to help the alliance in its electoral campaign. The important West Pakistanis who had campaigned for the United Front included Pir Abdul Latif Zakori, Ghulam Muhammad Khan of Lundkhwar, Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din and Mehmud-ul-Haq Usmani.³⁴ The UF leaders raised those issues that attracted masses while the PML raised traditional issues which had no charm for the masses.³⁵

Along with criticising the League’s weaknesses the Front offered hope to the people for better future. The twenty one point programme had great attraction for the masses and was successfully propagated in every nook and corner of East Bengal. The Front succeeded in communicating its message and winning the people. Being a conglomerate of heterogeneous parties, the alliance could disintegrate any time but their common enemy

32 *Ibid.*, 24 December, 1953.

33 *Ibid.*, 21 December, 1953.

34 In response to the Muslim League which had invited important political figures from West Pakistan to campaign for her electoral victory, the Awami Leaguers belonging to West Pakistan and sympathizers like Mian Iftikhar-ud-Din also toured East Bengal to boost the confidence of and campaign for the United Front. Along with East Pakistani popular leadership they contributed in the United Front’s unprecedented victory in the elections.

35 Yunus, *Syasi Itihaad*, p.51.

(League) kept it united and effective. Masses supported the allies for change.³⁶

However, during the election campaign, signs of the UF falling apart began to appear. Fazlul Haq was reported to have walked out of a meeting of the UF parliamentary board. Many of the disagreements arising in the UF dealt with the questions of candidates, each of the component party demanding the acceptance of its personal list. The main rivals were the KSP and the AML; and the NIP and the GD. Fazlul Haq was criticised by the AML for nepotism in distribution of the UF tickets.³⁷ On hearing about this irregularity the students interfered in nomination of certain candidates whom they felt Fazlul Haq was favouring unnecessarily. They demonstrated against Fazlul Haq which frightened him. He promised them that in future he would leave everything in the hands of Suhrawardy. This shows that the latter enjoyed greater respect among students and common masses.³⁸ Another serious threat to unity of the alliance came from the NIP, which selected its candidates without consulting the UF, while accusing it of issuing tickets to “undesirable candidates” and to persons “known to be communists”. Yet such differences were not allowed to reach a breaking point before the elections. Maulana Bhashani acknowledged that the Front was besieged with problems. However, he used his influence to maintain unity.³⁹

As the date of polling drew near the electoral campaign intensified and the tone of League’s campaigners became harsh.⁴⁰ Nurul Amin, East Pakistan Muslim League’s president, had realised that his party would lose if she failed to attract the attention of voters. For this objective he engaged influential and important people including the Prime Minister.⁴¹ Khan Qayum, Qazi Isa, Sardar Abd-ur-Rab Nishtar, Sardar Shaukat Hayat Khan, Sardar Ibrahim (AJK) and Miss Fatima Jinnah were invited to East

36 Salamat, *Historical Review*, p.119.

37 *Dawn* (Karachi), 27 January 1954.

38 *Ibid.*, 11 January, 1954.

39 Lawrence Ziring, “The Failure of Democracy in Pakistan: East Pakistan and the Central Government 1947-1958” (Ph. D. Diss., Columbia University, 1962), p.66.

40 *Dawn* (Karachi), 8 February, 1954.

41 *Ibid.*, 24 February, 1954.

Pakistan to campaign for the Muslim League. The Prime Minister and his cabinet members frequently toured East Pakistan to address public meetings of the League.⁴² The JUI *Ulama*, Mualana Abdul Qayum Kanpuri, Maulana Abdul Aziz Jawara and Maulana Alauddin Hyder, were also requested for help. They arrived from West Pakistan to campaign for the League on 21 February 1954.⁴³

The hectic electoral activities and intensification of electoral campaign invited clashes between workers of the PML and the UF. There were complaints and counter complaints about disturbance at election meetings. It was reported that workers of opposition as well as the ruling party made efforts to disrupt public meetings, stage demonstrations and use abusive language against their opponents. This attitude polluted the political environment and led to unnecessary clashes between workers of contesting parties.⁴⁴

In campaign the UF leaders criticized and held Muslim League responsible for all their grievances. The campaign gained considerable momentum. The League harped on its old tune but realizing the UF popularity (on agencies reports) postponed elections from 16 February to 8 March, requested Fatima Jinnah to run their campaign and got Eisenhower announce military aid to Pakistan, which was made on 25 February, 1954. The UF's criticism did not budge the League from its decision to postpone the polling date.⁴⁵ This was an attempt to help the League in election. It was typical misunderstanding of popular opinion and, in any case, the party's image was beyond repair and this step cast further negative effect.⁴⁶

The UF balanced these tactical moves by solemn observation of the 2nd anniversary of the "Martyrs Day", in commemoration of those killed in the language demonstrations of 21 February, 1952.⁴⁷ Maulana Bhashani led the procession of barefooted, bareheaded

42 Ziring, "The Failure of Democracy," pp.167-68.

43 *Dawn* (Karachi), 22 February, 1954.

44 *Ibid.*, 26, 28 & 29 January, 1954.

45 Munir Ahmed, *Pakistan Kay Syasi Ittihaad* (Lahore: Frontier Post Publications, 1993), p.19.

46 Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1999), p.188.

47 Afzal, *Political Parties*, pp.117-18.

Bengalis. The long trail of mourners, their arms draped in black, marched solemnly to the burial ground where the students struck down in the memorable conflict had been interred. After a quite ceremony at the graves of the young martyrs the procession marched to “Paltan Maidan” where the UF public meeting was scheduled. By postponing the elections the government provided an opportunity to the opposition to exploit the language issue more vigorously. The opposition took full advantage of it.⁴⁸

In response to martyrs day the PML observed Kashmir Day in which she condemned Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly’s decision to accede to India and pledged to liberate Kashmir which was possible only under the PML government and demanded votes from the masses for the same in elections.⁴⁹ To discredit the UF in public eyes Sardar Ibrahim alleged that the UF had received ten million rupees from India and that it would take its orders from India after success in East Bengal elections.⁵⁰

Miss Jinnah’s 8 day campaign tour ended on 7 March. She campaigned in special train to ask for votes for the ML. She assured people by declaring that the PML had won independence for them and strength could also be given by her.⁵¹

Despite its efforts to avoid electoral defeat the Muslim League met its water loo at the hands of the UF.

TABLE 1
East Bengal Provincial Assembly Election Results 1954

Muslim Parties		Non-Muslim Parties	
	Seats		Seats
United Front	223	Pakistan National Congress	24
Muslim League	10	Scheduled Castes Federation	27
Khilafat-i-Rabbani Party	01	United Front (Minority)	10
Independents	03	Others	11
Total	237	Total	72

Source: Munir Ahmed, *Pakistan Kay Syasi Ittihaad* (Lahore: Frontier Post Publications, 1993), 19.

48 Ziring, “The Failure of Democracy,” p.169.

49 *Dawn* (Karachi), 28 February, 1954.

50 *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 13 March, 1954.

51 *Dawn* (Karachi), 8 March, 1954.

While no one had been sanguine about the League's prospects, they had not expected a rout. The Table 1 provides detail of East Pakistan Provincial Assembly's election results 1954.

The UF polled 65.6 percent of popular vote and secured 223 seats in the assembly of 309; the League was reduced to a mere 10 seats and to add insult to injury Nurul Amin himself was roundly defeated by a 28 years old student leader. In sixty constituencies League candidates lost their security deposits and managed to make a decent showing in only fifty electoral fights.⁵² The League had met its nemesis in East Bengal; the UF got overwhelming majority and formed its ministry. The respective strength of the parties within the United Front is given in table 2.

TABLE 2
Strength of Parties within United Front

Component Parties	Seats
EPAML	143
KSP	48
NIP	19
GD	13
Total	223

Source: M. Rafique Afzal, *Political Parties in Pakistan 1947-1958*, Vol. I (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1986), p.118.

United Front in Power

After gaining electoral victory the UF elected Fazlul Haq as its parliamentary leader on 2 April 1954. The new four member cabinet under Fazlul Haq took oath on 3 April, 1954. Of these three cabinet members belonged to the KSP and one to the NIP.⁵³ The AML and the GD had no representation in this cabinet. It was expected that after negotiation between Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq remaining parties of the UF would also secure cabinet berths according to their numerical strength in the provincial legislature. But unfortunately for almost more than one month the issue of cabinet expansion remained unsettled. There were ideological and personal rifts between constituent parties and personalities. The

⁵² Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule*, p.189.

⁵³ *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 6 May, 1954.

clash between the NIP and the GD proved more harmful. The former was backed by the KSP's leadership while the latter by the AML's leaders. These controversies embittered relations between the parties of the UF and contributed to the continued impasse in the Haq and Suhrawardy's relations over the expansion of the cabinet. The main reason for the deadlock, according to Haq, was his refusal to give a large slice of the ministry to the Awami League and its young inexperienced and extremist members.⁵⁴ Haq, actually, wanted larger share for his party though it had only 48 seats in the assembly as compared to the AML's 143. According to coalition norms each component party of the coalition receives pay-offs in proportion to its numerical strength in the legislature. The KSP and the NIP did their utmost to violate these norms. This violation further deteriorated already fragile relations between the allies. The extent of the differences became public when Suhrawardy, in an attempt to hush up reports of a rift, accused the governor for delay in cabinet's expansion. After lengthy dialogues between the top leadership of the KSP and the AML the issue of cabinet expansion was settled. Suhrawardy and Fazlul Haq agreed on expansion of the cabinet. On 15 May ten new ministers took oath of their offices.⁵⁵ Even this enlargement of the cabinet could not give representation to respective parties in accordance with their numerical strength in the assembly. The KSP and the NIP got larger slice in the ministry. Out of fourteen ministers seven belonged to the KSP, five to the AML, two to the NIP and none to the GD. This disproportionality kept leadership of both sides tensed and increased misunderstanding between them.

In spite of tension between the allies, the alliance's unity was maintained due to unanimity on issues of representative nature of the Constituent Assembly and US military aid. The UF leaders believed it constitutionally improper for the Constituent Assembly to continue under the control of the Muslim League. All the members of the Constituent Assembly who contested the elections against the UF had been defeated and it seemed ludicrous that they should be retained as members of the constitution making body.

54 Afzal, *Political Parties*, pp.120-21.

55 *Ibid.*, 16 April, 2 May and 16 May, 1954. See also Afzal, *Political Parties*, pp.120-21.

The Muslim League had contested the elections on whether or not the people wanted a constitution which the Muslim League had pledged to deliver. The result showed that the Bengalis neither wanted any part of this constitution nor the present members of the Constituent Assembly.⁵⁶

The United Front took unanimous stand for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, or at least the resignation of its Bengali members.⁵⁷ The demand was inspired by their desire to share power at the centre as well as to secure a better bargaining position in support of their twenty one point programme, especially on the issue of provincial autonomy.

This demand alarmed influential groups in West Pakistan; the Prime Minister rejected the demand saying in federation no single unit could presume to speak for or to dominate the other units.⁵⁸ Though Maulana Bhashani threatened to launch a movement for dissolution of the Constituent Assembly but it was submerged in controversies of vital significance for survival of the UF.⁵⁹

Another issue where more or less constituent parties had agreement was that of US Aid. Most of the East Bengalis feared that the agreement with US would compromise country's sovereignty. Soon after the signing of the US-Pakistan Military Aid Pact on 19 April, 1954, 162 members of East Bengal Assembly, belonging to various parties expressed grave concern about the pact. On the GD's appeal almost all opposition parties observed "Anti US-Pakistan Military Pact Day".⁶⁰ The only component of the UF that welcomed aid was the NIP while Suhrawardy was discreet and non-committal in his comments for perhaps fears of his colleagues. This criticism could not be swallowed by the Central Government under bureaucratic control.⁶¹ She was waiting for an appropriate time to get rid of the United Front's Provincial Government.

56 Ziring, "The Failure of Democracy," pp.173-74.

57 McGrath, *The Destruction*, pp.117.

58 *Ibid.*, p.118.

59 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.119.

60 Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule*, p.190.

61 Ziring, "The Failure of Democracy," pp.184-85.

Fazlul Haq's controversial visit to Calcutta (from May 4-8) provided an opportunity to the Centre to interfere. At a reception, he is reported to have expressed the hope "to remove the artificial barriers that had been created between the two Bengals." He further said, "Bengalis are bound by common language and heritage." On another occasion, he is reported to have condemned the "political division of the country." The statements he issued during his Calcutta visit made him controversial figure in the country.⁶² This further deteriorated the existing uneasy relations between the centre and the UF's newly elected Provincial Government. Haq denied the charge but no one listened to him.

After the UF's electoral victory, the law and order situation had deteriorated in East Bengal. In the last week of March 1954, a gruesome riot at the Karnafuli Paper Mills had left 13 dead and 35 injured.⁶³ Throughout the ministry's brief tenure in office the province was gripped by industrial violence, including trouble in Dacca Central Jail which resulted in 50 injuries — 19 of whom were victims of police firing. The climax reached with the outbreak of riots at the Adamjee Jute Mills, infamous for its subhuman working conditions and so a "powder keg of discontents"; some 400 people were killed and many more wounded. The army had to be called in. The blame of this disturbance was laid on the Provincial Government's so-called communist friends.⁶⁴ Suhrawardy considered all acts of violence a conspiracy of the Central Government who could not swallow the bitter pill of the UF success in provincial elections. The whole leadership of the front believed that the Central Government was conspiring against the alliance by distorting its image using the state apparatus.⁶⁵

The Centre asked Haq to round the communists up. This complicated the matter because the Chief Minister denied any involvement of communists in the violence. *New York Times* story of 23rd May added further fuel to the fire. It was reported in the

62 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.122.

63 Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule*, p.190. *Dawn*, Karachi, 24 March, 1954.

64 *Ibid.*, p.190.

65 *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 20 May, 1954.

paper that Haq was trying for the separation of East Bengal. At that time Haq was attending Chief Ministers' meeting at Karachi. He denied the charge but the Centre had made up its mind by now to get rid of the UF ministry. Haq was declared traitor and on 29th May his cabinet was dismissed and under section 92-A Governor Rule was imposed.⁶⁶ Sikandar Mirza was sent as new governor who banned political activities and arrested the UF activists. Mujib-ur-Rehman, Fazlul Haq, Yousaf Ali Chaudhry and 33 MPs along with number of workers were arrested.⁶⁷ Centre's charges were ministry's inability to maintain law and order, its failure to inspire confidence in administration, Haq's conspiracy to disintegrate Pakistan and the presence of enemy's agents aiming to undermine the integrity of the country by creating industrial unrest.⁶⁸

The dismissal was resented by the UF leadership and the dismissed cabinet declared it an undemocratic and arbitrary action but appealed to the public to maintain peace and promised to continue the struggle to vindicate their democratic rights. East Bengalis felt that there was a US hand in dismissal of Haq's ministry. The dismissal had followed the 19 April defence aid pact between Pakistan and US and subsequent report of a US journalist Kalhan published on 23rd May in *New York Times*.⁶⁹

After the dismissal of its ministry, the UF stayed almost dormant till the end of the year. This was due to unavailability of its leadership for one reason or the other. Suhrawardy was abroad for medical treatment, Bhashani was in exile because of Mirza's threats and Haq had announced retirement from politics under Sikandar Mirza's pressure.⁷⁰ Occasionally, the second rate leadership of the UF issued statements to the press in which they demanded restoration of parliamentary institutions.

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly on 24 October 1954 made a stir in political calm. The UF wanted to avail this

66 Talukdar, *Syasat Bitee*, p.78.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Afzal, *History and Politics*, pp.122-25.

69 Talukdar, *Syasat Bitee*, p.78.

70 Salamat, *Historical Review*, p.119.

opportunity for restoration of parliamentary institutions in East Pakistan. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was acclaimed by the AML and the KSP. Aaur Rehman, a deputy of Suhrawardy, made formal request to the Governor General to visit East Pakistan to see for himself jubilant reaction of people. The AML and the KSP arranged to give him unanimous welcome in the hope that parliamentary institutions would be restored but the Governor General advised them to be patient.⁷¹ This was for the last time that the allies had shown unity. Hereafter, the distance between the two major parties of the alliance kept on increasing.

Termination

Alliance termination may be as interesting and consequential as alliance formations and that one phenomenon cannot be properly understood except in context of the other. This section deals with the specifics of the United Front's termination.

The United Front was a conglomerate of parties with different policy positions on political chessboard. Both internal constraints and external pressures paved a way for its disintegration. After dismissal of the UF Ministry the Central Government gave air to internal differences between the allies by developing individual contacts with the leaders of the alliance. These efforts on the part of the Central Government created doubts. The first stone was thrown by the Governor General by persuading Suhrawardy to join the Interim Cabinet, known as "cabinet of talent," with the promise of premiership at an opportune time.⁷² The Prime Minister offered Haq a ministry in the new cabinet with assurance of government in East Bengal.⁷³ Fazlul Haq was welcomed as a real patriot by the Central Government this time. Earlier, he was declared a conspirator and traitor by the same Prime Minister and on the same charges his cabinet was dismissed. Suhrawardy joined the "cabinet of talent" as law minister without consulting his allies in the United Front. Similarly, Haq visited Karachi and without consulting Suhrawardy gave name of his men to be inducted in the Interim Cabinet. He even avoided meeting Suhrawardy who was in

71 Afzal, *Political Parties*, 156. See also Yunus, *Syasi Itihad*, pp.54-55.

72 Afzal, *History and Politics*, p.143.

73 *Ibid.*

Karachi at that time. This was resented by the latter's followers.⁷⁴ These individual self-seeking moves proved harmful for unity and integrity of the alliance. None of the major partners had realised the importance of consulting each other before making any commitment. This increased the distance between constituent parties of the alliance whose relations had already been fragile.⁷⁵

In January 1955, those East Bengali politicians who had association with the AML became active and started criticising Haq for his inability to behave as a responsible leader. He was also considered the only impediment in the way of restoration of parliamentary government in East Bengal. He was charged with violating the rules of the UF and of making utterances without consulting the other leaders.⁷⁶ Of these Mujeeb-ur-Rehman was the strongest critic of Fazlul Haq. On his release in January 1955 he won the support of his party colleagues to start campaign against Haq for his unauthorised statements in Calcutta. He believed that Haq had become a liability for the alliance after giving controversial utterances. Bhashani in Calcutta at that time appealed for maintaining unity in the UF, but the appeal failed to halt the widening rift. Finally, the UF parliamentary party met on 17 February, 1955, to consider a no confidence motion against Haq. But after the meeting, two conflicting statements appeared. Haq claimed 132 votes of 185 present while Ata-ur-Rehman Khan claimed 106 votes against 79.⁷⁷ This rift proved injurious to the unity and survival of the front.

In April 1955, Fazlul Haq succeeded in creating a situation in which he could punish those Awami Leaguers who had tried to oust him from coalition leadership in February last. After necessary manoeuvrings, he summoned meeting of the UF parliamentary party to deal with his opponents. The UF parliamentary party charge sheeted those who had a hand in an attempt made for ousting Haq. The charges levelled against Awami Leaguers included: their involvement in unwanted activities to

74 Afzal, *Political Parties*, p.157.

75 Yunus, *Syasi Itihad*, pp.55-56.

76 Ziring, "The Failure of Democracy", p.206.

77 Pobre, "History of Political Parties," p.159.

affect disunity and disruption within the party, an attempt to oust Fazlul Haq from it, a campaign against the party and its decision, encouraging grouping and factions within the party, establishing direct contact with the Central Government without consulting the UF leadership and hobnobbing with Suhrawardy and Central Government on various issues.⁷⁸ The above cited charge sheet shows that Haq had successfully manoeuvred to prove the UF as a political party under his leadership rather than an alliance of various political parties. The charge sheeted figures were treated as individuals rather than leaders of a component party of the UF. They were suspended from the UF while Suhrawardy was disowned. This move virtually terminated the UF.

After termination of the United Front, the Awami League adopted independent course of action. With the departure of a major partner the United Front had lost its significance but still Haq maintained its name. He joined the new cabinet of Chaudhry Muhammad Ali as Interior Minister while Suhrawardy became the opposition leader. Suhrawardy criticised Fazlul Haq for his betrayal. He claimed that at the time of alliance formation they had agreed to maintain harmony through assignment of roles. Suhrawardy had to support Haq to become Chief Minister while Haq was bound to support Suhrawardy in the Centre. Due to this understanding the latter had not contested the provincial elections.⁷⁹

The Ganatantari Dal and the Nizam-i-Islam Party along with the AML's splinter group under Abdus Salam Khan stayed united with the KSP. But this honeymoon period also ended within a year. The GD withdrew its support on 3rd January 1956. She had demanded release of political prisoners, immediate holding of by-elections on vacant seats, repealing of the Bengal Public Safety Act, a categorical declaration of the UF leaders in favour of democratic constitution embodying therein the system of joint electorates, full provincial autonomy and recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages. The KSP leadership could not satisfy the GD so she parted her ways.⁸⁰ In July, the Awami League's

78 *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 25 April, 1955.

79 Talukdar, *Syasat Bitee*, p.124.

80 *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 4 January, 1956.

splinter group deserted it. In September 1956, the NIP parted company on account of the failure of the KSP to declare itself in favour of separate electorates, to which the NIP was committed. Thus, the UF evaporated in the air after an eventful short life.⁸¹

Conclusion

The United Front was the first pre-electoral alliance in Pakistan's history. It was formed at the time when political parties in Pakistan had little or no democratic experience and training. The alliance's political experience proved an important asset for political actors in the subsequent history of the country.

The factors responsible for formation of the UF were multipartism, majoritarian electoral system (Simple Majority Single Ballot System) and the League's authoritarianism. At the time of Independence, there were only two effective parties in the country (League and Congress). But, gradually the number of political parties increased which led to multiparty system. New parties were established by those disgruntled elements that had been sidelined by the Muslim League's ruling clique. In the presence of Simple Majority Single Ballot System, in which whoever past the post first wins, the political parties functioning in East Bengal could not afford losing elections by contesting individually. They held talks to form the United Front to pool their resources and win the election. Along with these general factors country specific factors were also responsible for cobbling this coalition. They were League's authoritarianism and students' pressure and demand on party leaders to forge pre-electoral alliance to defeat the Muslim League. The students' demand was adoption of Bengali as national language which they believed was not possible unless the League was removed from the seat of power. So, the parties willing to contest the elections formed the United Front.

The coalition thus formed was heterogeneous in nature but she evolved a very effective strategy to deal with League's strength. They took full advantage of being an opposition group with full independence of criticising the ruling party. During election campaign the allies didn't allow their differences to surface to an

81 Salamat, *Historical Review*, p.120.

extent that would lead to disintegration. This provided them an opportunity to exploit the situation in their favour. The front had two advantages over the ML; firstly, its leadership was popular among the masses; secondly, its manifesto appealed to the genius of people. The minimum common programme of the alliance attracted unprecedented support from the masses. After routing the Muslim League in elections the alliance assumed power in East Bengal.

The major weakness of the alliance was the absence of institutionalised coordination mechanism. This was perhaps due to lack of coalition experience. The only mechanism they used to address differences was meetings of party heads. This too was an informal mechanism that needed proper institutionalisation. In case of differences between the allies the heads of constituent parties of the United Front used to sit together to tackle the situation. This mechanism played its part to an extent but failed to keep the alliance united for a reasonable duration. The coalition actors had yet to learn to institutionalise coordination mechanism and gain maturity in alliance politics

The United Front enjoyed power in East Pakistan for a very short time. Its government was dismissed by the Centre using various incidents and utterances as excuse. The election results had disclosed that it enjoyed confidence of the masses. This confidence made its demands for provincial autonomy, dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and adoption of Bengali as national language more vigorous. Its dislodging the Muslim League from power in East Pakistan had far reaching impacts. It paved the way for League's fall from power in the Centre also. Governor General, after dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, sought its support to defend his position. The Front welcomed the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and invited the Governor General to visit East Pakistan believing that he would restore parliamentary institutions in the province. The rift between the political forces strengthened the hands of military-bureaucratic complex. Since then Pakistan has been under the control of this complex. Lack of political maturity, personal grudges, policy and regional rivalries were responsible for failure in evolving consensus and strengthening political institutions.

After dismissal of its government the Front had been inactive till joining “cabinet of talent.” This new role not only facilitated political activities in the eastern wing of the country but also provided basis for disintegration of the alliance. Both, endogenous and exogenous, factors were involved in its termination. The personalities had played a key role in making and breaking of the United Front. Another problem with Pakistani politicians was that they got together against League to bring her down without taking care of their own ideological or policy differences. Due to this problem, the UF evaporated in the air after the fall of League’s government. The policy differences and personal rivalries were main endogenous termination factors of the UF while government’s interference worked as exogenous factor. The Central Government had created rift among the allies through political manoeuvring. She exploited the existing differences between the parties which played its part in termination of the alliance.

The United Front, in spite of having very short span of life, left lasting impacts on political history of Pakistan. It produced mixed results. It played a major role in League’s fall from power but failed to replace it. It became a source of inspiration for subsequent opposition fronts in the country. It could have contributed to evolve elite consensus after success in the elections but due to immaturity of the then political leadership it failed in playing nation building role.