

Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1905-1940: A Case Study of the Krishak Proja Party

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There is no denying of the fact that the Muslims of Bengal played a pioneering role in the creation of Pakistan. But it was not a sudden phenomenon rather it contains a long historical background which resulted in a vigorous mass movement to regain their lost rights as a nation. The dire need of such a unified struggle though felt at different quarters immediately after the occupation of Bengal by the British East-India Company in 1757, but the most effective launching occasion was the Partition of Bengal held in 1905. As a matter of fact it was the occasion when the Muslim Politics in Bengal came across a turning point and that resulted into a strong struggle to safeguard the rights of the Muslims of Bengal in particular and the whole subcontinent in general. In this process the Krishak Proja Party of Bengal had played a very important role which seems to be highlighted to have a better understanding of the Pakistan Movement. This article is an effort towards that direction. In this pen picture I have tried to lay before the readers the circumstances which led to the formation of the party at a time when the All-India Muslim League was existing. Moreover, the aims and objectives, organisational structure, policies and functioning of the Krishak Proja Party have been analysed. Efforts have also been made to highlight the ultimate merger of the party with the All-India Muslim League. Finally, the article has tried to understand the fate of the party after the

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adoption in 1940 at Lahore of the Pakistan Resolution proposed by Sher-i-Bangal A.K. Fazlul Huq, the founder of the Krishak Proja Party in 1929.

The aforementioned partition of Bengal by the British Government in 1905, brought some sort of hope to the Bengali Muslims who were socially, economically, culturally and politically crushed by the British as well as the Hindus, after the fall of Nawab Siraj-ud-Dawla at the battle of Plassey in 1757. As the British East-India Company snatched power from the Muslims, so, undoubtedly the Muslims of Bengal were being considered as their number-one enemy. Hence, the British tried their level best to crush not only the remaining power of the Muslims but also their political consciousness so that they would not be able to raise their head in future. To achieve those targets the British authority adopted the policy of "divide and rule" and also used the Hindus of Bengal in suppressing the Muslims. This policy of the British authority initially helped them but that mechanism of political harvesting in a cunning way could not sustain as such for good.

When the British government planned to divide Bengal into two parts to solve their administrative problems, the Hindus, generally of the subcontinent and particularly of Bengal, launched a severe demonstration campaign to the extent that even the British authority got alarmed and ultimately cowed down before the Hindu agitation. On the other hand the Muslims of Bengal supported the partition scheme which would make them majority in the newly formed province and also facilitate their say in the administrative and economic spheres. But the Hindu opposition to the scheme was like a crushing blow to their hope and aspirations. Thus it became very clear like day light that the Hindus would not allow the Muslims to become influential in the land and that forced them to be conscious about their future. This consciousness of the Muslim Bengal gave birth to certain political organizations some of which played very important role in the political arena not only of Bengal but also the entire subcontinent.

The first Muslim political organization which came into being after the partition of Bengal was called "Mohammedan Provincial

Union”¹ with the objective of “uniting the Mohammedans of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam into a compact body and representing to that government the views and aspirations of Muslims in social and political matters.” This political organization was the outcome of a Muslim provincial conference held in Dhaka which was called by Nawab Salimullah on 16 October 1905, the day of partition of Bengal became effective. Nawab Salimullah was elected as the Patron of the Mohammedan Provincial Union.² Through this provincial organization the Muslims of Bengal tried to solve their problems locally. But the Muslims of Bengal soon realised that their problems could not be solved locally. Therefore, they began to adopt more effective strategy to safeguard their rights *vis a vis* their rival communities. The ultimate result of those efforts was the formation in 1906 of the All-India Muslim League at Dhaka.

The Muslims of Bengal did not form any important local political party in the presence of the All-India Muslim League³ till the time when the League became ineffective due to the factionalism within the party on the question of lending support to the all white Simon Commission which was set up in 1927. That frustration forced the Muslims of Bengal to deal with the communal problems with the help of locally formed parties. Another matter which drew their immediate attention was the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act of 1928 which faced severe opposition from the Hindu leaders, many of whom were landlords. The primary cause of their opposition was certain rights which were given to the tenants, majority of whom were Muslims.

On the question of Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act all the Hindu members of the Bengal council voted in favour of the landlords and all the Muslim members, irrespective of their party

1 The word “Mohammedans” means “Muslims”.

2 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, (New Dehli: Impex India, 1976), p.35.

3 “The Muslim peasantry of Bengal became totally disillusioned with the Congress and at the same time they were aware of the ineffectiveness of the Muslim League to protect their interest...” See, Shaukat Ara Hussain, *Politics and Society in Bengal: 1921-1936, A Legislative Perspective*, (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1991), p.36.

affiliation, voted in favour of the peasants and cultivators, “eighty percent”⁴ of whom were Muslims. Thus the house was divided visibly on communal lines. Another result of the debate on the Tenancy Act was that the Muslims of Bengal lost their faith in the Indian National Congress almost completely.⁵ Hence, Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan along with others left the Congress. Observing this situation, J. N. Sen Gupta once said, “from today the Congress not only lost the confidence of the Muslim Bengal but also that of the general peasants.”⁶ So, to cope with the new situation twenty-seven Muslim members from different groups of the Bengal Legislative council, held a meeting on 1 July 1929 in Calcutta and consequently two organizations came into being — one — an United Muslim Party called the Bengal Muslim Council Association and the other was the Bengal Proja Party (Bengal Tenants’ party).⁷ The primary objective of the Council Association was to advance the cause of the Muslim Community in the legislature. Any member of the association was free to join the Proja Party which came into existence simultaneously at the suggestion of A.K. Fazlul Huq.⁸

The Council Proja Party was formally inaugurated on 4 July 1929 at the home of Sir Abdur Raheem, merchant of Calcutta and a member of the Legislative Council, with Fazlul Huq as its leader and Abdur Raheem himself as the Deputy Leader.⁹ Soon the Council Proja Party was further broadened through a meeting in Calcutta, accommodating the Muslim political leaders of different kinds¹⁰ and it was re-named as Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* (All

4 Shila Sen, p. 66.

5 Shawkat Ara Hussain, p.36.

6 Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Ponchash Bochhor*, Vol.I, (Dhaka: Srijon Prokashani Limited, 1988), pp.48-49.

7 *Indian Quarterly Register*, Calcutta, vol.II, 1929, p.11.

8 Shila Sen, p.66. A.K. Fazlul Huq earlier in 1917 formed the Calcutta Agricultural Association which was short-lived, see, Bazlur Rahman Khan, *Politics in Bengal, 1927-1936*, (Dhaka: n.p., 1987), p.27.

9 Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan, MLC from Faridpur, was elected its secretary and the Joint Secretaries of the Party were: Khan Bahadur Azizul Haq of Nadia and Shah Abdul Hamid, MLC from Mymensingh East. See, *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*, pp.27-28.

Bengal Tenants' Association) with Sir Abdur Raheem and Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan as its President and Secretary respectively.¹¹

Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* was formed to safeguard the rights of the Muslims and scheduled Caste peasants as they were the oppressed and depressed classes.¹² But it was, however, predominantly a Muslim body¹³ and "both its leadership and following were exclusively Muslim."¹⁴ Even some Muslim landlords were quite active on this platform. For example, Nawabzada Syed Hasan Ali of Dhanbari area of Mymensingh district not only joined the *Samiti* but also extended significant financial support to the organization. Moreover, with his sizeable contribution the *Samiti* was able to purchase a press to launch its weekly organ the Chashi (cultivator).¹⁵ Some prominent Muslim landholders, however, remained aloof from the party.¹⁶ According to Bazlur Rahman Khan, "The Proja Party may, perhaps, be thus looked upon as a political platform for a section of the Bengali Muslim middle class from which to attack both the caste Hindu and the traditional Muslim leadership and so to tilt the political balance in the province in their favour. The elite leadership of the party hardly had the aim of creating an egalitarian society in their mind. A social revolution was the last thing they would have wanted: it was not pursuing a new social utopia but intent upon reaping immediate political benefits of their stance by dislodging the incumbent leadership. Let us, however, not underestimate the difficult task of the Proja Party leaders had undertaken: they now

11 The Vice-Presidents of the organization were: Maulvi Mujibur Rahman, Maulvi Abdul Karim, A.K. Fazlul Huq, Dr. Abdullah Suhrawardy and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin. See, Humaira Momin, *Muslim Politics in Bengal: A Study of Krishak Praja Party and the Election of 1937*, (Dacca: n.p. 1972), p.41.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Cesar P. Pobre, *History of Political Parties in Pakistan, 1947-1958*, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis), Karachi, University of Karachi, 1970, p.2.

14 Bazlur Ráhman Khan, p.28.

15 Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.49.

16 The Nawab of Dhaka and A.K. Ghuznavi kept away from the party. See, Bazlur Rahman Khan, p.28.

needed to conciliate various classes of Peasants, tenure holders and even to offer the Muslim landowners an suitable alternative if they were successfully to woo them.”¹⁷

The Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* remained an ineffective body till 1932,¹⁸ when it asked the district *Samities* to seek its affiliation. “Accordingly, all except the Tipperah Krishak Samity merged with the provincial body.”¹⁹ From then the Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* gradually became a strong organization.

Organization and public support-wise the Krishak *Samities* of Noakhali, Tippera, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Pabna and Bogra were most strong. The *Samities* of Bakerganj, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Murshidabad were also much active. All the above mentioned places were “Muslim Majority districts — where *zamindars* and *Mahajans* (money lenders), often the same persons, were predominantly Hindu.”²⁰ As has been mentioned earlier that the Mymensingh District Proja *Samiti* had its own printing press and published its own weekly organ, the Chashi (cultivator) — a Bengali language magazine.²¹

But the Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* had to face a setback when in 1935, its President Sir Abdur Rahim resigned from the party after being elected the President of the Central Legislative Assembly. This led to a power struggle within the party and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin of Burdwan and A.K. Fazlul Huq were aspiring for the presidentship of the *Samiti*. Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and other workers from West-Bengal were supporting Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin, whereas the workers from East-Bengal were supporting A.K. Fazlul Huq. Ultimately in a conference held in Mymensingh in 1935 A.K. Fazlul Huq became the President of the *Samiti*. This power struggle and polarisation within the *Samiti* led to strained relationship not only between Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and A.K. Fazlul Huq

17 *Ibid.*, p.29.

18 *Ibid.*, p.30.

19 Humaira Momin, p.42.

20 Bazlur Rahman Khan, p.32.

21 Abul Mansur Ahmed, p.49.

but also between the delegates from East-Bengal and West-Bengal.²² This factionalism within the organization had definitely severe negative impact in the growth of the *Samiti* as a stronger mass movement.

Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti* faced another setback in the year 1935, when the left wing of the Organization made a strong demand to include in the *Samiti* the real *krishaks* (peasants) and also to re-name the movement as Krishak Proja Party (peasants and Tenants' party). The demands were accepted primarily to avoid further division in the movement at a time when the general elections were knocking at the door.²³ Another important reason of changing the nomenclature and inclusion of the *Krishaks* (peasants) was to broaden the party "with the hope of wooing the rural votes whose number had then greatly increased."²⁴

By that time the Bengal Branch of the All-India Muslim League was almost non-existent.²⁵ It, however, existed in name and its leadership virtually went to those who were more active in the Krishak Proja Party. Maulavi Mujibur Rahman and Dr. R. Ahmad were its president and secretary respectively. The Krishak Proja Party thought it necessary to gain the support of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the president of the All-India Muslim League, to face the force of the "Nawabs and the knighted personalities in Bengal." So, through M.A.H. Ispani, they invited M.A. Jinnah to Bengal.²⁶

22 Kamruddin Ahmad, *The Social History of East Pakistan* Dhaka, Crescent Book Centre, 1967, p.30. According to Abul Mansur Ahmad, a prominent leader of the *Samiti*, both the rival groups at one stage in 1935 accepted Sir Abdur Rahim as the arbitrator to select the new president of the Organization. He selected Khan Bahadur Abdu1 Mornin but later on the supporters of A.K. Fazlul Huq did not abide by the decision. See Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.45-47.

23 Mostly the delegates from Chittagong, Noakhali and Comilla were behind the new demands, see, Kamruddin Ahmad, p.30.

24 Bazlur Rahman Khan, pp.34-35.

25 "The provincial Muslim League did not exist except in name. It had died years before through difference and neglect." see, M.A.H. Ispani, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah: As I Knew Him*, (Karachi: Elite Publishers, 1976), p.14.

26 Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.94-95.

As a result of a tactical move by M.A.H. Ispahani, A.K. Fazlul Huq and their friends, of both the major active political parties i.e., the Krishak Proja Party and the United Muslim Party, agreed to invite M.A. Jinnah to settle the disputes between them.²⁷ M.A.H. Ispahani instantly sent a telegram to M.A. Jinnah, informing him about the situation and also inviting, him to Calcutta to handle the situation in their favour.²⁸ M.A. Jinnah reached Calcutta on 15 August 1936²⁹ “to visit Bengal and to use his best endeavour to bring about peace, understanding and unity in the divided ranks of Muslim Bengal and to bring the United Muslim party and the Krishak Proja Party under the banner of the All-India Muslim League.”³⁰

The unity talks went on for several days and both the rival parties i.e., the Krishak Proja Party and the United Muslim Party, were not ready to compromise with each other. At one stage when the rumour of Krishak Proja Party’s merger with the Muslim League spread out, the United Muslim Party suddenly took the lead and merged itself with the Muslim League. Thus the Krishak

27 During mid 1936 political rivalry grew up between the Krishak Proja Party and the United Muslim Party. Amids this situation the United Muslim Party called a three-day All-Bengal conference at the Calcutta Town Hall in August 1936. A large number of delegates were to attend the conference. So, M.A.H. Ispahani, fearing ensuing success of the party, persuaded A.K. Fazlul Huq to create disturbance in the conference to bar the success of the United Muslim party. On the first day of the conference i.e., 9 August 1936, in a pre-planned way, A.K. Fazlul Huq entered the Town Wall along with some of his supporters. At one stage of the proceedings of the conference A.K. Fazlul Huq stood up and started addressing the gathering but the workers of the United Muslim Party shouted loudly to stop him. The counter shouting from the supporters of A.K. Fazlul Huq created a confusing situation and working of the meeting became impossible. Thereupon, M.A.H. Ispanani suggested postponement of the conference and also to invite Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah to settle the differences among various leaders of Bengal. See, M.A.H. Ispahani, pp.20-23. Also see, Rangalal Sen, “Elite Conflict and Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947”, in S.R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain, eds., *Bangladesh History and Culture*, vol.I (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1986), p.85.

28 *M.A.H. Ispahani to M.A. Jinnah* (telegram), in Z.H. Zaidi, ed., *M.A. Jinnah-Ispahani Correspondence, 1936-1948*, (Karachi: Forward Publications Trust, 1975), p.76.

29 *M.A. Jinnah to M.A.H. Ispahani*, *ibid.*, p.77.

30 M.A. H. Ispahani, p.23.

Proja Party was out-manoeuvred by the United Muslim Party at the last moment.³¹ Talks between M.A. Jinnah and A.K. Fazlul Huq, however, continued. M.A. Jinnah put forward the following conditions:

- i. The Krishak Proja Party will have to nominate its candidates, for the coming general elections, on Muslim League tickets.
- ii. The demand for abolition of landlordism will have to be struck off from the Krishak Proja Party's manifesto.
- iii. In the Parliamentary Board, the Krishak Proja Party and the Muslim League will get forty and sixty percent representation respectively.
- iv. M.A. Jinnah himself will select Muslim League representatives.³²

On the other hand the Krishak Proja Party came forward with the following demands and conditions:

- i. In Bengal their representatives would fight the election on Krishak Proja Party's ticket but at the centre they would accept Muslim League ticket and at All-India level the Krishak Proja Party would abide by principles of the Muslim League.
- v. In the Parliamentary Board the Krishak Proja Party will have to be given fifty percent representation.
- vi. Like Krishak Proja Party, the Muslim League representatives will be selected by the provincial working committee.³³

31 *Ibid.*, p.24.

32 M.A. Jinnah's argument was that — All over India elections will have to be conducted only on Muslim League ticket to attain solidarity among the Muslims. To M.A. Jinnah the condition of abolition of landlordism was in fact a demand to forfeit personal property, and that was against the principle laid down in the Muslim League's new constitution. See, Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.96.

33 The leaders of the Krishak Proja Party thought that they would lose the support of the Scheduled Caste population of Bengal if they fight election on Muslim League ticket. On the question of selection of Muslim League representation by M.A. Jinnah, according to Abul Mansur Ahmad, their argument was — through selection by the working committee, they would get the cooperation of the Muslim League workers but on the contrary nomination could open back-door for the un-wanted persons and that would create disturbing situation. See, *ibid.* pp.96-97.

M.A. Jinnah did not accept the demands of the Krishak Proja Party on the ground that Krishak Proja Party's offer to join the Muslim League at the central Assembly was useless because the elections of central Assembly was not scheduled by that time. On the question of support from the scheduled caste voters, M.A. Jinnah argued that in case of election on the Muslim League ticket they would be able to gain their support because the elections would be held on the basis of separate electorate. On the issue of election to the provincial Muslim League representatives to the Parliamentary Board — M.A. Jinnah argued that — as the provincial Muslim League was under the influence of the Krishak Proja Party, so their supporters would form the majority in case of selection by the working committee. To him — it would ultimately close the door for the Muslims of all parties.³⁴ The prolonged discussions which lasted about a week, ultimately broke down because of non-agreement on the issue of abolition of landlordism without compensation — a demand which was primarily raised by the young representatives of the Krishak Proja Party.³⁵ The Krishak Proja Party then decided to take part in the ensuing provincial elections on their own.³⁶

The Krishak Proja Party adopted a fourteen-point manifesto for the provincial elections in Bengal under the Government of India Act of 1935. It was called the “fourteen-points” of the Krishak Proja Party and was drafted in the light of the fourteen-points of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Highlights of the Krishak Proja party's manifesto were: abolition of *zamindari* without compensation, tax reduction, introduction of free and compulsory education, construction of a hospital at every Thana, total autonomy for Bengal, reduction in the administrative expenditure, rupees one thousand monthly salary for the ministers and release of the political prisoners.³⁷

34 *Ibid.*, p.97.

35 Humayun Kabir, *Muslim Politics (1906-1942)*, (Calcutta: Gupta, Rahman & Gupta, 1943), p.10.

36 Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.100-103.

37 For more details, see, Abul Mansur Ahmad, *ibid.*, pp.91-92. Also see, Rangalal Sen, p.87.

It is important to note here that as a result of the internal factionalism in the party, Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin with the support of Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy and others continued their efforts to counter the Krishak Proja Party, on the platform of original Nikhil Bongo Proja *Samiti*. The majority of the peasantry, however, supported the Krishak Proja Party.³⁸ Later on Maulana Mohammad Ikram Khan, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan along with some other leaders of the peasantry joined the Muslim League but some of the old leaders of the peasantry formed independent tenants' parties to contest the provincial elections of 1937.³⁹ This situation was somehow disturbing for the Krishak Proja Party.

Under the circumstances the Krishak Proja Party to win the elections, mainly concentrated on the basic economic needs of the common men. It promised to provide basic food to everybody and adopted *dal bhat* (rice and pulse-curry) for everyone as its vote catching slogan.⁴⁰ "An important aspect of the Krishak Proja party leadership was the fact that though it had its quota of *zamindars*, *talukdars* and *zotedars*, besides locally important personalities such as lawyers, doctors, Mukhtiars, and some Maulvis and Maulanas, it could not be denied that it was essentially peasant-oriented and radical in its socio-economic outlook. Its election programme was not motivated by electoral gains alone, for its leaders were in Proja movement from the very beginning".⁴¹ These factors helped the Krishak Proja Party to approach the voters effectively.⁴²

The election campaign started by the middle of 1936 and gained Momentum in the first week of January 1937. As the Krishak Proja Party refrained from contesting for the general seats

38 Shila Sen, p.74.

39 Abdul Mansur Ahmad, p.103.

40 Shila Sen, p.80. Also see, Rangalal Sen, p.87.

41 Shila Sen, p.86.

42 The Krishak Proja Party's "programme was supported by the larger group of peasants and progressive section of the educated middle class." See, Rangalal Sen, p.87. Also see, *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, 1937, pp.31-32.

and similarly the Congress left the Muslim seats uncontested,⁴³ so, for the Muslim seats the main fight continued between two major parties i.e., the Krishak Proja Party and the Muslim League.⁴⁴ The Krishak Proja party's campaign was mainly concentrated in the rural areas, whereas the Muslim League was clearly dominant in the urban areas.⁴⁵

Under the circumstances, after the final counting of votes, among the Muslim political parties, the Krishak Proja Party stood second securing total thirty-six seats out of seventy-five contested constituencies. The maximum seats went to the independent candidates who got forty-three seats including two special seats. The Muslim League after contesting in eighty-two constituencies, stood first with thirty-nine seats including four special seats. The Tripura Krishak Samity stood third with five seats. The Krishak Proja Party could not win any urban seat and all the six seats went to the Muslim League which bagged twenty-nine rural seats as well. The Muslim League was able to capture 61.47 percent urban and 26.52 percent rural votes, whereas the Krishak Proja Party got 15.39 percent urban and 31.78 percent rural votes. Thus the Krishak Proja Party managed to win 31.51 percent of all the Muslim votes. During the whole election process the Potuakhali constituency got most of the attention of the people as well as the press because it was contested by two veterans i.e., A.K. Fazlul Huq and Khawaja Nazimuddin.⁴⁶ Here, on 27 January 1937,⁴⁷ the former was victorious with 13,742 votes as against 6,308 votes cast in favour of the later.⁴⁸ The independent Muslim members

43 "The Bengal Congress was too divided at that time and alienation of most of the Muslim leaders after 1935 made it [the Congress] almost a Hindu organization.... Neither the Congress in Bengal had courage to contest Muslim seats nor could any Muslim risk to fight election on Congress ticket." see, Shila Sen, p.81.

44 "An unattached group of Independents" was also present in the fight. See, *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, Calcutta, 1937, p.31.

45 Humaira Momin, p.63.

46 For details of the contest, see, A.S.M. Abdur Rab, *A.K. Fazlul Haq: Life and Achievements*, Lahore, Ferozsons, 1966, pp.87-89.

47 *Indian Annual Register*, Vol.1, Calcutta, 1937, p.4.

48 Shila Sen, pp.88-89.

gradually joined the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party. Thus finally the total strength of the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party became sixty and fifty-four respectively.⁴⁹

As per results of the elections no single party was in a position to form government independently. So, a coalition between two or more parties was must to form a government in Bengal. As a result of rivalry between the Krishak Proja Party and the Muslim League in Bengal, initially there was no strong hope for coalition between the two parties. As the Krishak Proja Party and the Congress did not contest each other during the elections, so there was stronger possibility of a coalition between the two. Thus, after the completion of election results the two parties began discussions in February 1937 to form a coalition government in Bengal. The Congress had sixty seats⁵⁰ in hand and the Krishak Proja Party had thirty-six seats and their total strength was ninety-six seats. So they needed the support of thirty more members to form a stable government. Another big problem on their way was the Congress indecision to form a government till that time. In such a situation the Congress could support the Krishak Proja Party in forming the government without taking any ministry.⁵¹ The point of non-acceptance of any ministry by the Congress actually was favourable for the Krishak Proja Party, because that would meant firstly A.K. Fazlul Huq would definitely be the Chief Minister and secondly most of the share of the cabinet would go to the Krishak Proja Party. As a result of prolonged discussions, three major points of the coalition formula were agreed upon and those were:

1. to demand self-government;
2. to amend the Tenancy Act, and
3. to enact Debtor Act.

But main disagreement centred on the point of release of the political prisoners. The Congress insisted to include their demand for release of political prisoners which was not acceptable to the

49 Rangalal Sen, p.87.

50 In Bengal the Congress members were the largest single group. See, P.N. Chopra, ed, *Towards Freedom, 1937-47*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1985), p.222.

51 Shila Sen, p.90.

Krishak Proja Party, because that point may not be acceptable to the Governor of Bengal. Such a situation could open the way for re-election which would not be favourable for the Krishak Proja Party *vis-a-vis* the Muslim League. According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, a participant on behalf of the Krishak Proja Party in the dialogue with the Congress, they feared dissolution of the proposed coalition government because of political crisis and without passing any laws would prove the Muslim League's claim that the Krishak Proja Party was in fact a rear compartment of the Congress and that all their commitments to the people were false propaganda to catch votes.⁵² But the Congress leaders made the question of release of the prisoners as their prestige issue and the Krishak Proja Party — Congress cooperation dialogue broke down ultimately.⁵³

On the other hand, on 31 January 1937, A.K. Fazlul Huq declared that "the Proja Party would co-operate with the other Muslim groups in the Bengal Assembly."⁵⁴ Therefore, a simultaneous dialogue on the formation of a coalition government between the Krishak Proja party and the Muslim League went on and the bargaining got Momentum as a result of the disagreement between the Congress and the Proja Party. The Muslim League ultimately withdrew its demand for the chief Ministership and agreed to select A.K. Fazlul Huq as the Premier of the proposed coalition.⁵⁵ Both the parties decided to form a eleven-member cabinet — with six Muslim and five Hindu Ministers.⁵⁶ Among the

52 Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.114.

53 *Ibid.*, pp.144-46.

54 This was declared by A.K. Fazlul Huq at a reception given in his honour by the Muslim Students of Bengal. See, *Indian Annual Register*, Calcutta, Vol.1, 1937, p.4.

55 In a memorandum on 12 March 1939 on the elections the secretary of State wrote: "In Bengal the different Muslim parties are prepared to unite to form a Government, and can thus command a larger following than the Congress. Mr. Fazlul Huq, the leader of the Proja or Tenant Party, has undertaken to form a Government on the basis of a coalition between his party and the Muslim League." See, P.N. Chopra, p.222.

56 In a letter to the Governor of Bengal on 11 March 1937, A.K. Fazlul. Huq wrote: "The Moslem group will not consent to more than 4 Hindu ministers.... They told me that the 6:5 will make me for more unpopular with the Moslems than it will make me popular with the Hindus. After all, the Moslem Group will

six Muslim members three would be from the Krishak Proja Party and the rest would be from the Muslim League. It was also decided that there would be three caste Hindu ministers and two would be scheduled caste.⁵⁷ But the Governor objected the inclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Secretary of the Krishak Proja Party, because of his anti-British Government activities. A.K. Fazlul Huq in the beginning agreed to form a ten-member cabinet excluding Shamsuddin Ahmed. But later on, at the eleventh hour, included Nawab Mosharraf Hussain in the Krishak Proja Party's quota. It was done primarily for two basic reasons — firstly, the exclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmed would make the Krishak Proja Party, a minority in the Cabinet and the Muslim League members with three seats would be in a dominating position *vis-a-vis* the Krishak Proja Party members in the cabinet; and secondly, in a ten-member cabinet, the ratio of the Hindu and Muslim members would be equal.⁵⁸ The Governor of Bengal finally accepted A.K. Fazlul Huq's proposal for the formation of eleven-member cabinet on 24 March 1937.⁵⁹

Exclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmad from the cabinet gave birth to such a serious discontent that ultimately it divided the Krishak Proja Party into two visible factions. To discuss the problem, the Krishak Proja party called an emergency meeting of its leaders in Calcutta in the evening of the day on which the Bengal Cabinet was sworn in. After a heated discussions the meeting decided to form a six member advisory board⁶⁰ with 'majority' members from

have to be main-stay of the Ministry and naturally I ought to think of those considerations which will strengthen the solidarity of the Moslem Group." See, P.N. Chopra, p.219.

57 The nominees of the Krishak Praja Party were: 1) A.K. Fazlul Huq; 2) Syed Nausher Ali; 3). Shamsuddin Ahmed (he was replaced by Nawab Mosharraf Hussain). From the Muslim League: 1) Nawab Bahadur Habibullah; 2) Sir Nazimuddin; 3) Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy. From the Caste Hindus: 1) Naliniranjan Sarkar; 2) Bijoy Prasad Singh Roy; 3) Srish Chandra Nandi (Maharaja of Qasim Bazar). From the Scheduled Castes: 1) Mukundo Bihari Mallick; 2) Proshanno Dev Raikat. See, Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.117. Also see, A.S.M. Abdur Rab, pp.89-90.

58 Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.120-21.

59 *Indian Annual Register*, vol.I, Calcutta, 1937, p.9.

60 Members from the Krishak Proja Party were: A.K. Fazlul Huq, Syed Nausher Ali and Abul Nansur Ahmad; and from the Muslim League were: Nawab

the Krishak Proja Party. Some of the ministers and members of the Assembly disliked the advisory board which was formed to advise the government on different political matters. They, therefore, termed the board as "Super Cabinet". As a matter of fact, the board was not an end itself but was formed to cool-down these Krishak Proja leaders who became angry due to the exclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmad from the list of the Cabinet ministers.⁶¹ This, however, could not completely please the dissatisfied persons within the Krishak Proja Party and consequently they formed an independent group within the Krishak Proja Party. This independent Krishak Proja party nominated Tamizuddin Khan as their candidate for the post of Speakership of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and sought Congress support in their favour but the later declined. "The Congress failure to support Tamizuddin injected a fresh dose of communal feeling into the legislative politics of Bengal."⁶² On the other hand the contest for the speakership on behalf of the independent group of the Krishak Proja party, widened the rupture in the Krishak Proja Party.

Shamsuddin Ahmed the secretary of the Krishak Proja Party, along with twenty other members of the Assembly went to the press and levelled charges of breaching the election pledges made by A.K. Fazlul Huq.⁶³ These differences continued to grow and ultimately A.K. Fazlul Huq expelled seventeen members from the Krishak Proja Party and got elected new office-bearers of the party in a meeting of the Bengal Krishak Proja Assembly Party held on 1 September 1937.⁶⁴ After this extreme step the dissident Krishak Proja Party leaders with support from the Congress mounted pressure on the coalition ministry. In this condition A.K. Fazlul

Bahadur Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin and Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy. See, Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.123.

61 Shila Sen, pp.97-98.

62 In the first voting for the speakership, Khan Bahadur (later Sir) Azizul Haque (coalition), Kumar Sibsekhareswar Roy (Congress) and Tamizuddin Khan (independent Krishak Praja Party) got 116, 83, and 42 votes respectively. But in the second balloting, the name of Tamizuddin Khan was dropped and consequently Azizul Haque got 158 votes and sibsekhareswar Roy got 82 votes. See, Shila Sen, pp.96-97.

63 *Ibid.*, p.98.

64 *Ibid.*

Huq had to bank mostly on the support of the Muslim League to retain his government. A.K. Fazlul Huq finally left the Krishak Proja Party in the beginning of September 1937 and joined the All-India Muslim League at its annual session held in Lucknow in October 1937.⁶⁵ “Sher-e-Bangal”⁶⁶ A.K. Fazlul Huq then began to carry out “propaganda in favour of the Muslim League” and made it a stronger organization.⁶⁷

In the meantime Nikhil Bongo Krishak Proja *Samiti* and the dissident members of the Assembly Krishak Proja Party were reorganized expelling A.K. Fazlul Huq⁶⁸ as well as other Krishak Proja leaders who were still supporting the Krishak Proja-Muslim League coalition.⁶⁹ Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan’s desertion from the ministrialist coalition party on 11 March 1938 and the formation by him of the Independent Proja Party with his seventeen followers, almost completely alienated the Krishak Proja party from the Muslim League in Bengal. Together with seventeen Krishak Proja party dissidents the total number of opposition members from the Krishak Proja party rose to thirty-four and only two members out of total number of thirty-six elected members on Krishak Proja party ticket, remained with the coalition. Thus A.K. Fazlul Huq became more dependent on the support of the Muslim League.⁷⁰

The break away Krishak Proja Party members of the Assembly with the help of the Congress Assembly party tabled ten abortive no-confidence motions against individual ministers in the monsoon session of the Assembly in 1938. This ultimately demoralized the dissident members of the Krishak Proja Party. As

65 Shila Sen, pp.98-99. Also see, *A.K. Fazlul Huq to Muhammad Shahjahan*, in A.S.M. Abdur Rab, p.160.

66 A.K. Fazlul Huq received the popular title of “Sher-i-Bangal” during the Lucknow session of the All-India Muslim League. See, Kazi Anwarul Huque, *Under Three Flags*, Dhaka, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1987, p.117.

67 *Ibid.*

68 A.K. Fazlul Huq did not give up the Presidentship of the Krishak Praja Party after joining the Muslim League. See, Shila Sen, p119.

69 *Report of the fifth annual general meeting of the Nikhil Bango Krishak Praja Party held on 11 September 1937 c.f., Ibid., p.103.*

70 *Ibid.*, p.119.

a result of re-thinking “Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan, leader of the Independent Proja Party and Shamsuddin Ahmad of Krishak Proja Party joined the cabinet in November 1938, on the assurance from A.K. Fazlul Huq to implement the programme of the Krishak Proja Party. A.K. Fazlul Haq’s “main intention was, of course, to wean the Krishak Proja Party away from the Congress. Shamsuddin resigned on 17 February 1939 on the ground that Fazlul Huq did not fulfil the promises given to the Krishak Proja Party. However, by that time the damage had been done by splitting the Krishak Proja Party opposition to the detriment of the Congress”.⁷¹

The last peasants and tenants, conference was held in a village of Mymensingh on 20 February 1939 i.e., three days after Shamsuddin Ahmad’s resignation from the Cabinet. Thereafter, even the meeting of the Krishak Proja Party’s council was not Convened.⁷² Thus the Krishak Proja Party gradually declined and it could retain the support of only nineteen members in the Assembly by the end of 1941 when A.K. Fazlul Huq formed his second ministry in Bengal as a result of a coalition between his newly formed Progressive Assembly Party and some other parties including the Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and the Krishak Proja Party.⁷³ The strength of the Krishak Proja Party came down to seventeen by April 1943 when Khawaja Nazimuddin formed his ministry in Bengal.⁷⁴

71 Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.157.

72 *Ibid.*, pp.157-58.

73 Shila Sen, p.137.

74 *Ibid.*, p.173.