

***Muslim Political Ascendancy in Bengal:  
A Case Study of the Roles Played by the  
Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the  
Krishak Proja Party (1906-41)***

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The partition of Bengal in 1905 brought some sort of hope to the Bengali Muslims who were politically, socially, economically and culturally crushed after the fall of the Muslim rule in Bengal in 1757. The trauma continued and when in 1905 the British government divided 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 made them majority in the newly formed province and also created an atmosphere in which the Muslims would get their due share in the administrative and economic spheres. But the Hindu opposition to the scheme was detrimental 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 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 the Bengal was called “Mohammedan Provincial Union”<sup>1</sup>

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1 The word “Mohammedans” means the “Muslims”.

with the objective of “uniting the Mohammedans of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam into a compact body and representing to the government the views and aspirations of Muslims in social and political matters.” This political organization was the outcome of a Muslim provincial conference in Dhaka which was called by Nawab Salimullah on 16 October 1905, the day from which partition of Bengal became effective. Nawab Salimullah was elected as the Patron of the Mohammedan Provincial Union.<sup>2</sup>

Through this provincial organization the Muslims of Bengal tried to resolve their problems locally. The Muslims of Bengal soon realized that the problems of the Muslims of Bengal could not be solved locally and so they immediately began to organize the Muslims of all over the subcontinent to adopt more effective strategy to safeguard their rights vis-à-vis their rival communities. The ultimate result of those efforts was the formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906.

The Muslims of Bengal did not form any important local political party in the presence of the All-India Muslim League<sup>3</sup> 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. That frustration forced the Muslims of Bengal to deal with their problems with the help of locally formed parties. Another matter which got 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 the 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 affiliation, voted in favour of the peasants and cultivators, “eighty percent”<sup>4</sup> of whom were Muslims. Thus the house was divided 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.<sup>5</sup> Hence,

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2 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (Delhi: Impex India, n.d.), 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.

4 Shila Sen, p.66.

5 Shaukat Ara Hussain, *Politics and Society in Bengal ...*, p.36.

Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and 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.<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> 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 being simultaneously on the suggestion of A.K. Fazlul Huq.<sup>8</sup>

"The Council Proja Party was formally inaugurated on 4 July 1929 at the home of Abdur Raheem, a Delhi merchant of Calcutta and MLC, with Fazlul Huq as its leader and Raheem himself as the Deputy Leader."<sup>9</sup> Soon the Council Proja Party was further broadened through a meeting in Calcutta, accommodating the Muslim political leaders of different kinds<sup>10</sup> and it was re-named as Nikhil Bongo Proja Samiti (All Bengal Tenants' Association) with Sir Abdur Raheem and Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan as its president and secretary respectively.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> But it was, however, a predominantly Muslim body<sup>13</sup>

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

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

8 Shila Sen, p.66. A.K. Fazlul Huq earlier formed the Calcutta Agricultural Association which was short-lived, see, Bazlur Rahman Khan, *Politics in Bengal, 1927-1936* (Dhaka: 1907), 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.

11 The Vice-Presidents of the organization were: Maulvi Mujibur Rahman 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 Proja Party and the Election of 1937* (Dhaka: 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.60.

and “both its leadership and following were exclusively Muslim.”<sup>14</sup> Even some Muslim landlords were quite active on this platform. For example, Nawabzada Syed Hasan Ali of Dhonbari area of Mymensingh district not only joined the Samiti but also extended significant financial support to the organization. Moreover with his sizable contribution the Samiti was able to purchase a press to launch its weekly organ the Chashi (cultivator).<sup>15</sup> Some prominent Muslim landholders, however, remained aloof from the party.<sup>16</sup> According to Bazbur 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 under estimate the difficult task of the Proja Party leaders had undertaken: they now needed to conciliate various classes of peasants, tenure holders and even to offer the Muslim landowners, a suitable alternative if they were successful to woo them.”<sup>17</sup>

The Nikhil Bongo Proja Samiti remained an ineffective body till 1932,<sup>18</sup> when it asked the district samities to seek its affiliation. “Accordingly, all except the Tipperah Krishak Samity merged with the provincial body.”<sup>19</sup> 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 Zamidars (landlords) and Mahajans (money lenders), often the same persons, were predominantly Hindu”.<sup>20</sup> As has been mentioned earlier that the Mymensingh District Proja Samiti had its

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14 Bazlur Rahman Khan, p.28.

15 Abu1 Mansur Ahmad, p.49.

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

17 *Ibid.*, p.29.

18 *Ibid.*, p.30.

19 Humaira Momen, p.42.

20 Bazlur Rahman Khan, p.32.

own printing press and published its own weekly organ, the Chashi (cultivator) — a Bengali language magazine.<sup>21</sup>

But the Nikhil Bongo Proja Samiti had to face a set-back when in 1935, when 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 Chairmanship 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 polarization within the Samiti led to bitter relationship not only between Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and A.K. Fazlul Huq but also between tie delegates from East-Bengal and West-Bengal.<sup>22</sup> 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 set-back 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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup>

By early 1930's the Bengal Branch of the All-India Muslim League was almost non existent.<sup>25</sup> However, the branch existed in name and its

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21 Abul Mansur Ahmed, p.49.

22 Kamruddin Ahmad, *The Social History of East Pakistan* (Dhaka, Crescent Book Centre, 1967), p.30. According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, 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 Abdul Momin 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.3.

25 "The provincial Muslim League did not exist except in name". See, M. Ispahani, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah As I Knew Him* (Karachi: Elite Publishers, 1976), p.14.

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 deemed it necessary to gain the support of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad All 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. Ispahani, they invited M.A. Jinnah to Bengal.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of a tactical move by M.A.H. Ispahani, A.K. Fazlul Huq and their close associates, 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> M.A. Jinnah reached Calcutta on 15 August 1936<sup>29</sup> “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.”<sup>30</sup>

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

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26 Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.9

27 During mid 1936 political rivalry grew up between the Krishak Proja Party and the United Muslim party. In 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., 2 August 1936, in pre-planned way, A.K. Fazlul Huq entered the Town Hall with some of his supporters. At one stage 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. Ispahani 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* (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.

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 Proja Party Was out-manoeuvred by the United Muslim Party at the last moment.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

On the contrary the demands of the Krishak Proja Party were:

- 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.
- ii. In the Parliamentary Board the Krishak Proja Parts will have to be given fifty percent representation.
- iii. Like Krishak Proja Party, the Muslim League representatives will be selected by the Provincial Working Committee.<sup>33</sup>

M.A. Jinnah did not accept the demands of the Krishak Proja Party on the ground that Krishak Party's offer to join the Muslim League at the

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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 loose 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 of 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 person and that would create disturbing situation. See, *ibid.*, pp.96-97.

central Assembly was irrelevant because the, elections to be 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 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> The Krishak Proja Party then decided to take part in the ensuing provincial elections on their own.<sup>36</sup>

During the expeditious changing political scenario of mid 1930s, in the Indo-Pak subcontinental amphitheatre, the Bengal Provincial Muslim League(BPML) and Krishak Proja Party(KPP)<sup>37</sup> alliance in Bengal had incredible after effects on the subsequent contour and track of politics, not only of Bengal but within and without the entire region. Bengal being the largest Muslim majority province of the British India, it had a foremost political role to play in shaping the future political course. In that direction the aforementioned alliance had a decisive role which ultimately changed the course of history.

Hence, an assessment of the alliance deemed necessary to understand the then situation and also to respond few questions like: how the cooperation was possible when the aims and objectives of the two parties were mostly contradictory in shape and substance; was it merely based on power seeking or community target orientation remained in that; how far it influenced the forthcoming Pakistan Resolution and the consequent Movement; and finally, how that alliance led to the dismemberment of the KPP and resultant emergence of the ML as the sole representative body of the Muslims of Bengal.

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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 Peasant-Tenant Party.

To the Muslims of Bengal elections of 1937 was juncture for “... the revival of ‘Muslim Raj’ after wondering in the wilderness for near about a century and a half was a prospect that appealed to most inflammable sentiments of the community”.<sup>38</sup> During the election campaign the Muslim electorates were approached by three groups: the Muslim League, the Krishak Proja Party and an unattached cluster of independent candidates. In such a circumstance the Bengal Provincial Assembly elections were held in January 1937.

The election results (seats) were as follow:

Congress	52
Muslim League	39
Krishak Proja Party	36
European Group	25
Tripura Krishak Samity	05
Hindu Nationalist	03
Hindu Mahasabha	02
Anglo Indian	04
Independents (Muslim)	43
Independents (Hindu)	39
Christian	02
<hr/> Total	<hr/> 250 seats <sup>39</sup>

As the results suggest, no party was able to get the necessary majority to form a one party government. Hence, hectic efforts to form a coalition government went on almost simultaneously between the Congress and the KPP and also between the ML and the KPP. The Bengal Congress which initially tried form a coalition government with the KPP but their prolonged negotiations ultimately failed due to disagreement on the issue of release of the political prisoners. Thereafter, on 13 March 1937, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee decided not to accept office.<sup>40</sup>

In the mean time, negotiations to from a coalition government in Bengal between the KPP and the BPML were launched. Finally, the

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38 *Indian Annual Register*, (Calcutta: The Annual Register Office), 1937, Vol.I, p.31.

39 Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1936-1947* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1987) p.79.

40 *Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I, p.8.

BPML headed by Nawab Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca (Dhaka) and the KPP headed by A. K. Fazlul Huq, agreed in mid February 1937, to form a coalition government with the support of the independent members of the Bengal Assembly, accepting A. K. Fazlul Huq as the Chief Minister of Bengal. The decision was formally made public through a joint formal statement on 26 February 1937, by both the Presidents of the Bengal Muslim League and Krishak Proja Party.<sup>41</sup>

After prolonged discussions A. K. Fazlul Huq was decided to be the Chief Minister of an eleven member Ministry comprising four Ministers from the Muslim League, three (including the Chief Minister) from the Krishak Proja Party and the rest from among the independent members.

To understand the politics of the Alliance properly, an over view of the historical and political background of the province seems to be necessary.

The Krishak Proja Party adopted a fourteen-point manifesto for the provincial elections of 1937. It was called the "Fourteen-Points" of the Krishak Proja Party. The 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.<sup>42</sup>

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 Momen 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.<sup>43</sup> Later on Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen, 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.<sup>44</sup> This situation was somehow disturbing for the Krishak Proja Party.

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41 Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-47* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), p.91.

42 For more details, see, Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.91-99. Also see, Rangalal Sen, p.87.

43 Shila Sen, p.74.

44 Abdul Mansur Ahmad, p.103

The Krishak Proja Party emphasized on the basic economic needs of the common men. It promised to arrange basic food for everybody and adopted dal bhat (rice and pulse-curry) for everyone as its vote catching slogan.<sup>45</sup> “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, Mukhtiaris, and some Maulvis and Maulanas, it could not be denied that it was essentially peasant-oriented and racial in its socio-economic outlook. Its election programme was not motivated by electoral gains alone its leaders were in Proja movement from the very beginning”.<sup>46</sup> These factors helped the Krishak Proja Party to approach the voters effectively.<sup>47</sup>

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 and similarly the Congress left the Muslim seats uncontested,<sup>48</sup> so, for the Muslim seats the main fight continued between two major parties i.e., the Krishak Par Party and the Muslim League.<sup>49</sup> The Krishak Proja Party’s campaign was mainly concentrated in the rural areas, whereas the Muslim League was clearly dominant in the urban areas.<sup>50</sup>

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. The maximum seats went to the independent candidate 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

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45 See, Rangalal Sen, p.87.

46 Shila Sen, p.86.

47 The Krishak Proja party’s “programme was supported by the larger group of peasants and progressive section of the educated middle class.” See, *Indian Annual Register* Vol. 1937, pp.31-32.

48 “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 did 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.

49 “An unattached group of Independents” was also present in the fight. See, *Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I, Calcutta, 1937, p.31.

50 Humaira Momen, p.63.

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.<sup>51</sup> Here, on 27 January 1937,<sup>52</sup> the former was victorious with 13,742 votes as against 6,308 votes cast in favour of the later.<sup>53</sup> The independent Muslim members gradually joined the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party. Thus finally the total strength at the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party became sixty and fifty-four respectively.<sup>54</sup>

As per results of the elections, no single party was in 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. Hence, 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 seats<sup>55</sup> in hand and the Krishak Proja Party had thirty-six seats and their total strength ns 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 by that time. In such a situation

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

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

53 Shila Sen, pp.80-87.

54 Rangalal Sen, p.87.

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

the Congress could support the Krishak Proja Party in forming the government without taking any ministry.<sup>56</sup> 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 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 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-à-vis* the Muslim League. According to Abdul Mansur Ahmed, a participant on behalf of the Krishak Proja Party in the dialogue with the congress, 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.<sup>57</sup> But the Congress leaders made the question of release of the prisoners as prestige issue of their nation and the Krishak Proja Party — Congress cooperation dialogue broke down ultimately.<sup>58</sup>

In the mean time, on the question of formation of the government, A. K. Fazlul Huq declared on 31 January 1937, that 'the Proja Party would co-operate with the other Muslim groups in the Bengal Assembly.'<sup>59</sup> Therefore, a simultaneous dialogue on the

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56 Shila Sen, p.90.

57 Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.114.

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

59 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.

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 Ministry and agreed to select A.K. Fazlul Huq as the premier of the proposed coalition.<sup>60</sup> Both the parties decided to form an eleven member cabinet — with six Muslim and five Hindu Ministers.<sup>61</sup> Among the 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.<sup>62</sup> 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-à-vis* the Krishak Proja Party members in the cabinet; and secondly, in a ten-member cabinet, the ratio of the

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60 In a memorandum on 12 March 1937 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 of his party and the Muslim League." See, P.N. Chopra, p.222.

61 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 more unpopular with the Muslims than it will make me popular with the Hindus. After all, the Moslem Group will 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.

62 The nominees of the Krishak Proja 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) Grish 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.

Hindu and Muslim members would be equal.<sup>63</sup> The Governor of Bengal finally accepted A.K. Fazlul Huq's proposals for the formation of eleven-member cabinet on 2 March 1937.<sup>64</sup>

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 heated discussions the meeting decided to form a six member advisory board<sup>65</sup> with 'majority' members from 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.<sup>66</sup> They, however, could not completely satisfy the dissatisfied persons within the Krishak Proja Party and consequently they formed an independent group within the Krishak Proja Party. This Independent Krishak Party nominated Khawaja Nazimuddin as their candidate for the post of Speaker 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."<sup>67</sup> On the other hand the contest for the post of Speaker on behalf of the independent group of the Krishak Proja party, widened the rupture in the Krishak Proja Party.

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63 Abul Mansur Ahmad, pp.120-21.

64 *Indian Annual Register*, Vol.I, Calcutta, 1937, p.9.

65 Members from the Krishak Proja Party were: A.K. Fazlul Huq, Syed Nausher Ali and Abul Mansur Ahmad; and from the Muslim League were: Nawab Bahadur Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin and Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy, See, Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.123.

66 Shila Sen, pp.97-98.

67 In the first voting for the speakership, Khan Bahadur (later Sir) Azizul Haque (coalition), Kumar Shibshankar Roy (congress) and Tamizuddin Khan (independent Krishak Proja Party) got 116, 85, and 42 votes respectively. But in the second balloting, the name of Tamizuddin Khan was dropped and consequently Azizul Haque got 158 votes and Shibshankar Roy got 82 votes. See, Shila Sen, pp.96-97.

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> After this extreme step the dissident Krishak Proja Party leaders with support from the Congress mounted pressure on the Coalition Ministry. In this situation, A.K. Fazlul Huq had to bank mostly on the support of the Muslim League to retain his government. A.K. Fazlul Huq finally joined the All-India Muslim League at its annual session in Lucknow in October 1937.<sup>70</sup> “Sher-e-Bangla”<sup>71</sup> A.K. Fazlul Huq then began to carry out “propaganda in favour of the Muslim League” and made it a stronger organization.<sup>72</sup>

In the meantime Nikhil Bongo Krishak Proja Samiti and the dissident members of the Assembly Krishak Proja Party were reorganized expelling A.K. Fazlul Huq<sup>73</sup> and other Krishak Proja leaders who were still supporting the Krishak Proja-Muslim League coalition.<sup>74</sup> Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan’s desertion from the ministerialist coalition party on 11 March 1938 and the formation by him of the Independent Proja Party with 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

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68 *Ibid.*, p.98.

69 *Ibid.*

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

71 A.K. Fazlul Huq received the popular title of during the Lucknow session of the Muslim League. See, Kazi Anwarul Huque, *Under Three Flags* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1889), p.117.

72 *Ibid.*

73 A.K. Fazlul Huq did not give up the Presidency of the Krishak Proja Party after his joining the Muslim League. See, Shila Sen, p.119.

74 *Report of the Fifth Annual General Meeting of the Nikhil Bongo Krishak Proja Party held on 11 September 1937 c.f., Ibid.*, p.103.

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.<sup>75</sup>

The break away Krishak Proja Party members of the Assembly with the help of the Congress Assembly Party tabled ten futile 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 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 Huq’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”.<sup>76</sup>

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.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> The strength of the Krishak Proja Party came down to seventeen by April 1943 when Khawaja Nazimuddin formed his ministry.<sup>79</sup>

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75 *Ibid.*, p.119.

76 Abul Mansur Ahmad, p.157.

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

78 Shila Sen, p.157.

79 *Ibid.*, p.173.

From the above assessment it can be concluded that the All-India Muslim League was able to overcome the problem of regional identity and parochial interest serving, through the effective leadership of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah in association with the local Muslim leaders of Bengal. Consequently, the Krishak Proja Party of Bengal ultimately became ineffective the Bengal Muslim League emerged as the sole representative body of the Muslims of Bengal and hence, the creation of Pakistan become easier. Moreover the ascendancy of the Bengal Muslim league was based on larger Muslim identity which surpassed the linguistic identity of the Bengali Muslims. At the same time the Muslims of Bengal ignored their temporary economic interests in the quest of greater benefits like independence and self-respect.

The cooperation between the BPML and the KPP paved the way for the enhancement of the popularity of both the AIML as well as its leader Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. As Bengal was on of the very important Muslim majority provinces of India, hence, it had to play a major role in strengthening the Muslim cause i.e., the creation of Pakistan. In this background when A. K. Fazlul Huq moved the Pakistani movement on 23 march 1940 in Lahore which became a reality within seven years, i.e., on 14 August 1947.