



A SUITABLE IDEA OF NATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE 'NEW GOVERNMENT OF 1937' OF UNITED BENGAL

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When Haq emerged successful in the January 1937 Bengal provincial elections, it was a “double triumph” for him. Haq was incontestably the most popular leader in the Muslim electorate in Bengal, liked by Hindus as well. Extremely sure of his popularity Haq announced amidst pre-election fervor that he would stand on his party, KPP’s ticket, from any constituency that Khwaja Nazimuddin, member, League Parliamentary Board of Bengal, chose to stand from. Nazimuddin chose Pathuakhali, a constituency situated within his extensive zamindari, and still lost. That Haq would win the election was ¹ common knowledge, but what was perhaps a surprise for some was that he, the “most uncertain quantity” in Muslim politics, was invited by Anderson in February 1937 to form Bengal’s first autonomous ministry. Anderson was left with no choice. There was no Hindu leader who could form a ministry. Anderson noted that “the moral effects upon the ‘independents’ of the defeat by Haq of Nazimuddin was decisive, and made it clear that if there was to be a Muslim combination, Fazlul Haq must be its leader.” Anderson’s hands were tied. He had no reason not to invite Haq. Haq won a landslide victory by getting 13,742 votes as compared to Nazimuddin’s 6675 votes. The extent of his popularity can be gauged from comparisons that were made between Patuakhali and the historic Battle of Plassey. Haq in fact stood from another constituency, Pirojpur and won there as well. Though Haq considered his possible defeat during his campaigns, adding that his defeat would “be more glorious than that of Napoleon at Waterloo,” it was nothing more than theatrics, something Haq had mastered over the years, and something that became a staple in his politics. Upon being invited, Haq agreed to form the ministry. Theatrics remained Haq’s way of expressing himself in politics throughout his tenure. His professed pro-

¹ Nazimuddin has been called a Muslim League candidate in most works but officially he was member of the League Parliamentary Board of Bengal, a body set up by Jinnah to run the 1937 elections. Huseyn Suhrawardy was the organizational genius behind the Board. The Muslim League in January 1937 was moribund and existed only on paper. Before 1937 Nazimuddin was member of the United Muslim Party

proja ideology however kept changing. In fact, during most of 1937 Haq governed without a definite ideology, which was as much a consequence of Haq's personality, the times he lived in and the realities of provincial autonomy. The leader of the "new government" was so overwhelmed by the tide of events once he had and was recognized its leader. The Party's prominent members were from the Nawab of Dacca family. Naz²imuddin was a nephew of the Nawab of Dacca. Educated at Cambridge, he was a leading figure in the westernized aristocratic leadership of the provincial Muslim League agreed to accept office as first chief minister of Bengal that the question of mere survival acquired maximum urgency. Haq realized soon after assuming office that fighting the election was the easiest of all tasks. The real challenge lay ahead of the triumph. Forming a coalition did not prove to be easy. Haq needed a majority in the Assembly of 250 seats. Haq would have liked a coalition with the Congress as it had won 43 seats from the general constituencies and it was the "only organized and well-established political party in Bengal."³ Haq could have benefitted from that, given that the KPP still had to build its organizational strength. But Congress's High Command's "indecision" about office acceptance stood in the way of this alliance. The Congress, after "a largely ritualistic delay" accepted office in eight of eleven provinces. In Bengal it decided not to form a coalition. The main reason why the talks did not materialize was the issue of political prisoners. Bengal Congress wanted this issue to be a priority but Haq could not commit to it. Outside Bengal, Congress ministries were taking office in eight provinces and as mark of their new strength and to have all provincial ministries talk in one voice, the issue of political prisoners was critically important. The KPP on the other hand, was keen to ameliorate the conditions of peasants in Bengal. In the Muslim constituencies, out of a total of 117 seats, the KPP had won 40, Muslim League 39 but it was the independent Muslims who gained the maximum seats,⁴ Immediately

² Report on Formation of Bengal Ministry, December 1936-April 1937, IOR/R/3/2/2, Private Secretary's Office, Bengal. 3 December 1936. Also, on 3 December 1936 Anderson wrote that he was "credibly informed" that Huq would get paid by Congress on important divisions in the Council. Bengal Congress and Huq had a fairly old relationship of understanding.

⁴ Anderson to Linlithgow, 8 February 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor's Fortnightly Reports, IOL. Using Muslim League in place of League Parliamentary Board of Bengal. Anderson's figures over come to 248, excluding two pending bye-elections. The seats won by KPP and Muslim League do not match other secondary works but the difference is negligible and do not affect the conclusions in this work.



after 27 January, when the news of his momentous victory hit the headlines, Haq got down to the business of touring districts in Bengal to raise strength and win over Muslim independent candidates. His efforts did not come to much. It was a practical problem negotiating with individual politicians. Also, the KPP alone could not form a ministry by wooing the independents. It made sense therefore to approach the Bengal League. Haq did not want this alliance but he must have realized that the possibility of a stable combination among Muslims was the main key to the position. The Bengal League gained much from this alliance with Haq, as did the Muslim League, at the center. In the Muslim League Council minority province Muslims dominated.⁵ Jinnah wanted the Muslim League to be in a position where he could speak for all Muslim provinces and for that the Council would have to be well represented by Muslim majority provinces like Bengal. In 1937 Jinnah was struggling to make Muslim League politics more inclusive so as to have appeal for all Muslims, upper classes and the masses, in Muslim minority as well as Muslim majority provinces. Haq had an agenda which had attracted the masses, and though it was not targeted specifically towards Muslims, the poor in Bengal were mostly Muslims. Therefore by allying with Haq, Jinnah could hope to establish contact with the masses for the Bengal League, and through it the Muslim League. If the 1937 elections special had shown something, it was that “Muslim politics remained obstinately⁶ provincial,” and Haq was ruling the Muslim provincial scene.⁷ As Jinnah saw it, Haq was the Muslim League’s ride to turning “decrepit Muslim

⁵ For every hundred League members there would be one representative in the district League. The district League would elect members to the provincial League and they would in turn elect members to the League Council. The council was armed with powers necessary to select members from each province. Though the Muslim majority provinces were critical for Jinnah’s centrist ambitions, the manner in which the Council would be formed showed no provisions for provinces like Bengal. Whichever province had more Muslim League members would have more presence in the Council and United Provinces by that logic continued to dominate the Council.

⁶ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman : Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 41-42. Jalal cites conversation between Jinnah and Iqbal aimed at solving the paradox of spurning the only electoral support Muslim League had from minority provinces in hope of winning/gaining acceptance in Muslim majority provinces like Bengal. Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion : Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst, 2013). Devji’s central focus is to bring out these tensions in Muslim League and how that determined the nature of the Pakistan demand.

⁷ Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 225.

League into a mass movement.” There was no leader of his stature in the Bengal League. The Muslim League could also not allow a coalition between the Congress and Haq. While it is difficult to judge if Haq needed the Bengal League more or the other way round, a shared concern was the issue of Muslim unity. None of these parties wanted to be seen by co-religionists as having given up on a Muslim coalition without trying enough. By mid-February the negotiations between the Bengal League and the KPP were on a “fair way to success.” There were particular difficulties in trying to strike a balance between electoral promises and the practical needs of a coalition. For instance Nazimuddin’s men could not support Haq’s electoral pledge of one thousand rupees salary because they would not accept salaries lower than those of ICS secretaries. The question of primary education being offered with or without a cess also became a bone of contention with KPP feeling that to “insist on education cess would in effect be to torpedo the introduction of primary education for the masses.”⁸ Once the Muslim League came on board, independent Muslims followed and so did the European Group. The European Group was not too fond of Haq but they agreed to give support until the ministry did something to attack the interests of Europeans. The Hindu support came from the newly formed Nationalist Party, which included 14 independent caste Hindus and 22 scheduled castes. Of the Hindus Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and B P Singh Roy were significant additions.⁹ Even to contemporary observers it was clear that the ministry was being formed on the basis of very fragile reasoning and its alliances were, at best, slippery.¹⁰ Anderson also wrote of the “manouvres and counter manouvres that took place in February.” The solidarity that the coalition ministry with its mixed bag of Hindus and Muslims achieved was superficial and in the years that followed Haq often found himself in political deep waters trying to make the government work. The next big task for Haq was forming his cabinet ministry and assigning portfolios. It was a critical task because it determined who had real power within the ministry and the direction the ministry would take in passing legislations.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Anderson to Linlithgow, 8 February 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL. Sarkar of the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, had been Calcutta’s Mayor, like Haq. He was a significant person in the Indian business community and very keen on an office. He had left the Congress fold to explore his options in Haq’s ministry. He was considered a danger in opposition. B P Singh Roy came from the ranks of zamindars, a seemingly odd addition to a ministry that had vouched to abolish zamindari.

¹⁰ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 22 February 1937. Column by a student of politics.

By 25 March the ministry was formed with a 6 to 5 Muslim to Hindu ratio. The Hindus were given good representation in Haq's ministry. Nalini Sarkar was allotted the finance portfolio, which went a long way in placating the Hindus, perhaps not so much the Bengal Congress in the opposition. B P Singh Roy got revenue, Maharaja Sris Chandra Nandy got Communications and Works, Mukunda Behari Mullick got co-operative societies and debt Conciliation, and P Deb Raikat was given Excise and Forest. Of the remaining six positions, three were supposed to go to the Muslim League and three to the KPP. This is not what happened. Last minute changes brought in another Leaguer, Mosharraf Hossain at the cost of a KPP man, Shamsuddin Ahmad. With this change, the only two men left in the ministry from KPP were Haq in charge of the education portfolio and Nausher Ali, in charge of local self government. Mosharraf Hossain was given judiciary, Suhrawady had commerce and labor, Nazimuddin had home and Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca had agriculture. It is unclear why this last minute change took place. Abul Mansur Ahmad, an insider to these coalition talks, explains how Shamsuddin Ahmad was dropped because Anderson did not approve of him, but not why Haq would agree to filling the spot with a 30 Muslim League member instead of a KPP member.¹¹ It instantly reduced Haq's importance in his own ministry as his party had only two portfolios among eleven, not to mention they were not the most important ones. It seemed probable that the ministry would find it near impossible to pass pro-proja legislation.¹² It remained to be seen how Haq would handle the backlash. As transfer of power to the new ministry was completed on 1 April, Haq's ministry was aware that it was a "landmark" event.¹³ There was something remarkable about being part of history, and in the months that followed, despite different ideologies, the ministry stuck together. This was to become a source of relief for Haq because within a week of entering office he faced the formidable problem of the jute mill workers' strike, one in which over eighty thousand workers participated from in and around Calcutta. Police had to be brought in when the strikers

¹¹ Ahmad Abul Hasan Mansur, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar* (Dhaka: Srijan, 1988), 128-32. Ahmad describes a secret night meeting between him, Huq and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar at the latter's residence where the decision to drop Shamsuddin was taken. Huq's reasoning was that he would get Shamsuddin in soon. When Ahmad asked Huq by when Shamsuddin would be included in the ministry, Huq replied in English, "Leave it to me."

¹² Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), 94

¹³ ¹³The Statesman, 2 April 1937.

protested about their pay in front of Haq's residence. Dr Nalinakshya Sanyal of Congress raised the issue on the very first day of the Assembly, 7 April, and drew attention to the curtailment of civil liberties in the matter.¹⁴ With such an "auspicious" beginning to the session Haq had no option but to prepare for a fight. Over the course of the next few weeks Congress raised several objections, from critiquing Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's capability as labor minister, to declaring the speaker, Azizul Haque's election invalid.¹⁵ Anderson got "very angry with the Congress over its irresponsible behavior."¹⁶ Even Pinnell sympathized with Haq and wrote that he could not be criticized "so early in the day."¹⁷ As the situation deteriorated, Pinnell opined that the strike was being used by "agitators and professional politicians who aim[ed] at something much bigger than the redress of petty complaints..." Suhrawardy made the same allegation. The strike committee however responded to these suspicions, emphasizing that their strike was economically motivated, not politically. In a speech to workers in Belur, Suhrawardy tried to convince them that the "new government" was their "best friend" and all "genuine grievances" would be addressed through constitutional means. In continuation of the relentless effort on the part of the ministry, Haq met labor leaders on 6 May and revived hopes that the dispute between capital and labor could be solved.¹⁸ His ministry's efforts were successful when the workers went back to work on 10 May. But with strikers back at work a new problem presented itself, one that gave deep insight to observers about Haq's brand of politics. Two weeks after the strikers resumed work, A M A Zaman, MLA, and a signatory to the agreement between the strikers and the Haq ministry voiced his concerns about implementation of the clauses, one of which was that criminal cases against strikers would be withdrawn.¹⁹ Anderson observed that this caused some "embarrassment to CM" but he should have known that "the executive branch of government cannot interfere with the judicial

¹⁴ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 8 April 1937.

¹⁵ Azizul Huq used to be a Proja party man but he switched over to Muslim League.

¹⁶ Anderson to Linlithgow, Report on April, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor's Fortnightly Reports, IOL. These reports were written by the Governor as well as his Secretary. The British were keen on monitoring the grant of provincial autonomy and therefore from May 1937 onwards the Governors were required to send fortnightly reports instead of monthly.

¹⁷ Pinnell to Linlithgow, Report on 1st Fortnight of April, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor's Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8 May

¹⁹ Ibid., 23 May.

discretion of the ²⁰courts.” In response, Haq threatened resignation if a more liberal policy was not extended towards the arrested strikers.²¹ Though strikes continued to plague the ministry, for the time being peace prevailed when Suhrawardy made a case for recognition of legitimate trade unionism before the committee of the Indian Jute Mills Association.²² By end of May an understanding was arrived at by both parties. This incident proved that Haq had a rocky road ahead of him not always because he was under attack from the opposition. Sometimes, he was his own worst enemy. First, Haq’s shortcomings in terms of constitutional know-how became public knowledge, a shame given his position. Second, his hollow threats of resignation, a tactic he repeated time and again, tired the British out. Third, when Haq rescinded his resignation on the ground that the ministry was “working in harmony” he proved himself to be inconsistent and immature because the grounds on which he threatened resignation had been completely different. Fourth, the fact that ultimately it was Suhrawardy who brought matters to an end was a serious reflection on Haq’s capabilities, something that bothered Haq more than anyone else. Riding on the wave of his success with peasants, as chief minister, Haq had no set strategy for dealing with laborers, but neither did he have, for detenus. The release of political prisoners was the next problem that the Haq ministry had to face. Though the ministry stood strong in dealing with the issue, as it had in the case of the strikes, the debate on the release of prisoners uncovered some of its hidden tensions. E B H Baker wrote that despite the fact that the Haq ministry occupied itself with all kinds of business, “...what really exercised public opinion was the repatriation of the Andaman convicts, and the release of detenus...”²³ Compared to the strikes, this was a more protracted problem and it hit the Haq ministry under the belt. Whereas debates and negotiations on strikes were confined within the assembly or to industrial sites, with the legislature not in session, the opposition’s acerbic attacks on Haq were made before the public. In an article in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*’s 30 June edition, titled “Fazlul Haq’s Volte Face,”

²⁰ Anderson to Linlithgow, 22 May, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

²¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 May 1937.

²² *Ibid.*, 27 May. "Notes on a Bengal Chamber Meeting," in Benthall Papers (Box 12) (7 September 1937). p1-2. Not just the ministry, possible labor trouble was a cause of concern to the British as well. They would often discuss how to void it or contain it.

²³ Baker Papers, 20 June - 6 October 1937. E B H Baker was a Special Office in the Judicial Department. He held many positions which were temporary. He is most well known for his travel diaries.

Mohan Lal Saxena, secretary of All-India Political Prisoners' Relief Committee accused Haq of going back on his electoral pledges.²⁴ With the strikers having gone back to work, the Congress agitation had come to nothing. In Saxena's accusation Congress found a cause that it ardently believed in. More importantly, it was the issue that had prevented the Congress-Haq coalition from materializing. Saxena was right in his accusation. Before the election, out of eagerness to do well, Haq had collaborated with the Congress and had espoused the cause of the release of detenus. The first formal protest against Haq was articulated by Sarat Bose at a meeting in Albert Hall, Calcutta.²⁵ Now that Haq had entered office there was intense pressure to release prisoners unconditionally. As the attacks continued, Sarat Bose invited Haq, Nazimuddin, the home minister and Nalini Sarkar, the finance minister to address the public on all-Bengal Detenus' Day to be observed on 24 July.²⁶ As if the opposition was not causing enough damage already, on the issue of the release of prisoners, KPP also hardened its stand. The party had already been sore with Haq over Shamsuddin Ahmad's last minute exclusion from the ministry.²⁷ Anderson reported that a KPP meeting recommended the release of all detenus. The party decided to forward this resolution to the Assembly. Embarrassed that Haq was not aware of his own party's decisions Haq clarified that the decision was taken after he left. This meant Haq himself was admitting to his declining influence in the party he had founded. Anderson found it amusing to wonder if KPP, as supporter of the coalition, would "throw Fazlul Haq's present government on this issue." What was amusing for Anderson was a difficult turn of events for Haq. The situation improved only slightly with the start of next Assembly session on 29 July. The issue of the detenus was dealt with more systematically by Nazimuddin. In pursuance of the "cautious policy" that the Haq ministry had decided to adopt, Nazimuddin announced that the detenus would be brought back to the province in due time.²⁸ He was also responsible for the Assembly passing the demand for a jail grant.²⁹ Pinnell testified that the agitation for releases became

²⁴ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 30 June 1937.

²⁵ Ibid., 3 July.

²⁶ Ibid., 19 July

²⁷ Ahmad Abul Hasan Mansur, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar* (Dhaka: Srijan, 1988), 158-60. Ahmad describes well the the sence of betrayal the KPP members felt at how the ministry was formed and how it functioned. He also brings out the slow decline of Huq in the KPP

²⁸ The Statesman, 17 August 1937.

²⁹ Ibid., 31 August.

“intense” but Nazimuddin stood strong, “exercising a responsible judgment” in each case.³⁰ Haq wanted an end to the criticisms, but he could not let Nazimuddin steal the show, the way Suhrawardy had in handling the strikes. When Haq was at Dacca University for the convocation, in July, he had almost felt that he was in “enemy stronghold.” Haq in fact complained to Anderson that Nazimuddin had slighted him. Even though Nazimuddin served the ministry well, Haq treated him with suspicion. The ministry’s policy on detenues was also making Haq lose his popularity with the Hindu community. With an effort to re-assert his supremacy over Nazimuddin and also placate the Hindu community, Haq involved himself more directly with the release of prisoners in August. It was good timing because in August prisoners in the Andamans went on strike and the news got every Congressman involved from Sarat Bose to Gandhi. The prisoners received support from Gandhi and this put the Haq ministry in a precarious situation. Discussions started on release of prisoners and the situation quickly improved. Anderson reported, “Andaman strike was dealt with firmly and it enhanced the prestige of the ministry.” It was abandoned at last. Haq’s statement in the Legislative Assembly to the effect that a conference would have to be called in to consider the repatriation of the terrorist convicts at Port Blair resulted in an almost “complete fading out of agitation over this question.”³¹ With the detenu question behind him, Haq now prepared for the introduction of the single most important bill of his career: the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill. The provisions of the bill were significant but just the tabling of the bill had great symbolic value. It meant that Haq was finally delivering on his promises made to the projas.³² The Bill introduced by B P Singh Roy, the Revenue Minister on 10 September abolished the salami (landlords’ transfer fee) and the landlord’s right of pre-emption, suspended the provision for enhancement of rent and conferred occupancy rights on under-ryots.³³ The Bill received mixed reactions. Whereas coalition party members, like Maulvi Abdul Bari and Abdul Latif Biswas called it a historic announcement, Kumar Sibshekhareswar Roy of Congress thought the bill was a “striking

³⁰ L G Pinnell, "With the Sanction of the Government," (London: Indian Office Records, 2002). p67.

³¹ Anderson to Linlithgow, 7 September, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

³² From 1935 to 1937 there were several occasions when Huq walked out of coalitions because KPP’s stand on abolition of zamindari and the tenancy question was not accepted by other parties.

³³ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 24 August 1937.

stunning blow to the inherent right of the landlords to the ownership of land.”³⁴ Sarat Bose of the Congress Assembly Party, was another vehement critic of the bill. Even on the last day of discussion on the bill he called it “hypocritical,” and expressed his decision to “oppose the third reading of the Bill.”³⁵ The European Group, the zamindars and the Congress hardly gave an unqualified support to any clause. Curtis Millar of the European Group thought that the Bill was “an attempt to satisfy election pledges without regard to the practical consequences...”³⁶ He also thought the Bill was “ill considered” and likely “to do more harm than good to tenants.”³⁷ Similar thoughts were expressed by others as well, and to that Haq’s retort was quite bold.³⁸ He pointed out that if the Bill was bad for tenants, then that implied that it was good for zamindars, and if the latter was true why were the zamindars opposing it?³⁹ Haq was in his element when he defended the bill. While conceding that the bill was not a “counsel of perfection,” and it was “rather hastily drafted,” Haq still appealed to critics to “leave politics aside” and support the bill as mark of “duty” towards those who were “unable to take care of themselves.”⁴⁰ This was an evidence of Haq speaking pro-Proja language, the kind of rhetoric that had made him popular. Despite contradictions and loopholes the Bill was passed in the Assembly on 30 September, with 110 votes in favor and a paltry 27 in opposition. The ministry made a big deal about the fact that a first step had been taken towards amelioration of the indebtedness against which the ryots had been struggling. The success of the bill was surely made possible by the fact that Congress abstained from voting. But there was a deeper reason behind this quick passage of the Bill. Haq’s “new Government,” his new strength, stood rock solid behind him to ensure that the Bill was a success. Anderson observed that “on the whole, the ministry has emerged from the session stronger than

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Bengal Legislative Assembly, Second Session.," (Alipur, Bengal: 1937). 30 September

³⁶ Curtis Millar, "Secretary's Report on Budget Session," in Benthall Papers (Box 12) (1 October 1937). p3. Millar was a prominent English businessman in Calcutta.

³⁷ Ibid. p4

³⁸ Anderson to Linlithgow, 6 October, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL. Roy, the mover of the Bill also expressed to Linlithgow that by advocating the Bill he lost his friends among landlords but did not gain “real friendship” from projas.

³⁹ "Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Bengal Legislative Assembly, Second Session.," (Alipur, Bengal: 1937).

⁴⁰ Ibid. 30 September.

they entered it.”⁴¹ Suhrawardy in dealing with the strikers, Nazimuddin in discussing the detenu question and Sarkar in presenting the budget, spoke in one voice of the great change the “new Government” would bring. Roy was no exception. L G Pinnell rightly noted that in introducing the Tenancy Amendment Bill, Roy, born into a zamindari family, was “fighting a rearguard action against legislation intended to increase the rights of the peasants,⁴² mostly Muslims, against those of the landlords, predominantly Hindus. He was frequently forced to give way but did so with dignity and honour.” It is not surprising that while introducing the Bill, Roy brought attention of the House to the “great sacrifice” that this Bill would require of the zamindars. He also took the opportunity to blame the divide between landlords and peasants to “communistic ideas.”⁴³ However what worked for Haq, and this was true for all other cabinet ministers, was that Roy rose above his personal opinions and stood with the ministry as a sign of solidarity. Not everything went so well in the second Assembly session. Haq’s own party started giving him problems. The unwavering loyalty of the Proja voters during election did not translate into a vital support system for Haq in the Assembly. As a party the KPP did not do half as well in the elections as Haq did and that was the root of all problems. Whereas the KPP may have naturally hoped that with their party head in the most important seat, all electoral promises would be delivered, Haq, in charge of a coalition ministry, could not always oblige. The radicals in the KPP were dissatisfied with the composition of the ministry.⁴⁴ Haq’s party colleagues, mostly non-Proja men, had “so much invested in the existing system,” that it was foregone conclusion that Haq would not be able to meet his pre-electoral rhetoric based on a pro-peasant ideology.⁴⁵ KPP members worked as a pressure group, restraining the Haq government from “drifting too far to

⁴¹ Anderson to Linlithgow, 6 October, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

⁴² L G Pinnell, "With the Sanction of the Government," (London: Indian Office Records, 2002). p66.

⁴³ "Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Bengal Legislative Assembly, Second Session.," (Alipur, Bengal: 1937).

⁴⁴ Partha Chatterjee, "Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920-47," in *India's Partition. Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993)., p269.; Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), p95. Sen writes, KPP leaders resented that 9 out of 11 in the ministry were from the zamindar class and at least six had been elected from special constituencies which had no contact with the people at large

⁴⁵ John Broomfield, *Mostly About Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982)., p227.

the right.”⁴⁶ In August, Shamsuddin Ahmad and 20 other MLAs pressed charges of breach of election pledges on Haq.⁴⁷ A greater setback was their announcement that they would be voting independently.⁴⁸ Haq had reason to be alarmed. If his own party 38 members turned against him then naturally Haq would find it difficult to demand the allegiance of non-KPP members in his ministry, who were in any case, in a majority. The constant pressure exerted by the KPP to implement pro-peasant policies also took its toll on Haq. The haste with which the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill was prepared and introduced was a result of what Haq must have seen as the KPP’s constant bickering. Though the Bill passed in the Assembly, it did not escape Anderson that Haq would now “be compelled to accept dictation from the proja wing as the price of remaining in office.”⁴⁹ Anderson was clearly overestimating the KPP’s power and overlooking Haq’s practical nature. In fact, accepting “dictation” from KPP, while ignoring other parties represented in his coalition ministry, would mean political suicide for Haq. Losing grip on KPP would mean falling victim to greater Congress attacks. Anderson noted that if Congress was interested in strengthening the opposition then they would have to “encourage a more responsible and constructive form of opposition than merely seeking to inflame feelings and create ‘incidents.’”⁵⁰ Congress may not have dignified itself much in opposition, but it inflicted adequate harm on Haq’s ministry and would do so again, the next time the Assembly was in session. For the moment, the nefarious impact that Congress attacks could have on him was offset by Haq’s much-needed immediate victory and restoration of the proja’s (ryots) faith in him. But in the long term these small successes would not matter. Therefore what Haq needed was a vanguard against Congress’ venomous attacks and also a way to distance himself from the KPP pressure group. Haq found in an alliance with the Muslim League an antidote to both his problems. This was a significant contingent move for Haq, made necessary by his desire to strengthen his office.³⁹ It all started with Haq joining the Muslim League formally at its Lucknow session held in

⁴⁶ Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia, the Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*. (Boulder, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 185.

⁴⁷ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 19 August 1937

⁴⁸ Anderson to Linlithgow, 19 August, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

⁴⁹ Anderson to Linlithgow, 6 October, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, . Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

⁵⁰ Anderson to Linlithgow, 19 August, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

October 1937.⁵¹ The coming together of Haq and Jinnah was however as momentous as it was complicated. The Muslim League was well on its way to becoming a mass-based party, much like Congress was, already. Jinnah said in one of his speeches in the session that unless the Muslim League was seen as an equal by the Congress, no settlement with them was possible. The Muslim League as a representative party of the minority could not offer peace because it would always mean “confession of weakness,” and “politics meant power and not relying only on cries of justice or fair play or goodwill.”⁵² This strong stand also meant a more communally hardened position that Haq would have to adapt in Bengal, which, unlike India, had a Muslim majority but a very political and significant Hindu minority. Haq ignored these tensions for the moment. He embraced Muslim League’s stand quickly. In his speech in the session, Haq referred to the possibilities of “retaliation” against Hindus in Bengal for alleged injustices to Muslims in the United Provinces.⁵³ Haq’s move towards adopting the Muslim League’s ideology as part of his own politics was complete by the time the year ended. It was another one of his contingent moves. With the legislature not in session, Haq set out for a tour of East Bengal in December 1937, which no longer seemed like an “enemy stronghold.” He was greeted everywhere with shouts of Allah-ho-Akbar. Haq spoke of the “mischievous propaganda” being carried out against him personally and his ministry by the Hindu press. He said he was still sure that the Hindu press would not succeed in dislodging him from the heart of Muslim Bengal. About his coalition with the League party he clarified that it would be prudent in the “interest of the Muslim community as a whole.”⁵⁴ Back in Calcutta at the All-India Muslim Students Federation held at Mohammad Ali Park, Haq said that he had noticed while on his tour in East Bengal that Congress and its sympathizers were involved in a conspiracy not only against him but against Islam in general.⁵⁵ In this meeting, which was attended by Jinnah and other Muslim League stalwarts, Haq made it clear that he was behind

⁵¹Harun-or-Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics, 1936-1947*. Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leaders (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2003), p8. Haq joined the all-India chapter. The Bengal Muslim League was still not functional though efforts to revive it were being made.

⁵² Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 226.

⁵³ Anderson to Linlithgow, 5 November, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

⁵⁴ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 26 December 1937.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28 December.

the Muslim League ideology. Haq, whose slogan had until then been *daalbhat* (rice and pulses), a simple promise that his constituency, mostly illiterate peasants, understood well enough, now changed to include solidarity of Muslims.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Haq's move mirrored a change of sorts in Jinnah's ideology as well. A year before in Bombay, Jinnah called Muslim Leaguers "patriotic nationalists" and expressed his resolve to "hammer out plans" by which the two communities could work together.⁵⁷ Soon after, in Dacca in an All India Muslim League meeting, Jinnah discussed the urgent need to stamp out "communal phobia." While admitting that there were differences with the Congress he raised the hope of something stronger than the Lucknow Pact of 1916.⁵⁸ By the end of 1936 Jinnah had given up on his optimism. In the same meeting where Haq accused the Congress of anti-Muslim conspiracy, Jinnah said he had "rung the alarm bell." Jinnah clarified that "it was difficult indeed for the two communities to work in cooperation, in harmony..." and that Muslims would not be the "subject race of a Hindu Raj."⁵⁹ The unmistakable communal overtone in Haq and Jinnah's respective speeches were to serve the two leaders in different ways, however, and that complicated the history of this alliance. Haq's entry into the Muslim League camp marked a "turning point" for Bengal in the years before partition but determining the nature of this turn is important.⁶⁰ After a dismal performance in the 1937 elections, the show of strength that Muslim League was able to garner was considerable. Not just Haq, Sikandar Hayat Khan of Punjab also pledged his support to Jinnah. In the months following the session "One hundred thousand" new members joined the Muslim League.⁶¹ Haq's joining the Bengal League forces may well have been one in a series of many "ignominious compromises," but this turn was certainly not a complete surrender to the forces of communalism.⁶² In a period that is believed to have reflected "the

⁵⁶ Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), p80. Sen argues that KPP stood for *dal bhat* and Muslim League promised to protect political rights of the Muslims at the time of the 1937 elections.

⁵⁷ *The Statesman*, 16 December 1936.

⁵⁸ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 January 1937.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 28 December.

⁶⁰ Leonard A Gordon, *Brothers against the Raj. A Biography of Indian Nationalists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 325.

⁶¹ Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

⁶² Partha Chatterjee, "Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920-47," in *India's Partition. Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 269.

mutation in the formation of Hindus and Muslims as communities opposed to each other in the political arena,” reading Haq’s decision as part of this gravitation of all the Muslims towards Muslim League seems natural.⁶³ His anti-Hindu rhetoric completes the picture. But certain caveats to such a simplistic understanding of an “unpredictable” politician are necessary. With three decades of experience in politics under his belt when he assumed office in 1937, and having seen the 1926 communal riots, Haq knew better than to fall prey to communal politics. His support for the projas, mostly Muslims, was based on striving for economic justice. He had always protected rights of Muslims but had also maintained amicable relationship with the Hindus. He was attracted to the benefits of association with Muslim League but only because it strengthened his position in the Assembly. Haq’s speech where he warned the Hindus of “retaliation” surely had communal overtones to it but writing about Haq’s speech in the Lucknow session, Anderson did not seem the least alarmed. He wrote: “Actually from an administrative point of view I attach little importance to it and in fact he is not the kind of person to attempt to carry such threats into practice.”⁶⁴ Even his five Hindu ministers did not protest against Haq’s outrageous anti-Hindu comments, let alone wreck his ministry. In secondary works too Haq’s position seems very clear. Sen argues that within six months of taking office Haq knew that it was necessary to join the Muslim League and to satisfy it, he had to “arouse” communal, i.e. anti-Hindu passions.⁶⁵ The situation created by the Congress was such that Haq “could bank only on the anti-Hindu feeling of a section of Muslims to sustain him and his ministry.”⁶⁶ While partly correct, the aggressive anti-Hindu rhetoric could not have been a requirement for Haq being accepted into the Muslim League. With efforts being made to strengthen the Bengal League, Haq’s entry into the party was a big gain for Jinnah.⁶⁷ Haq’s inflammatory

⁶³ Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004)., p1

⁶⁴ Anderson to Linlithgow, 5 November, 1937, L/PJ/5/141, Bengal Governor’s Fortnightly Reports, IOL.

⁶⁵ Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976)., p99.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p97

⁶⁷ Harun-or-Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics, 1936-1947. Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leaders* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2003)., p5-7. Rashid discusses and provides evidence of how hard Suhrawardy was trying to get the Bengal Provincial Muslim League up and running. Bengal, where one third of Indian Muslims lived was an important province for Jinnah too, and that is why having a mass leader like Haq was invaluable gain.

speech was aimed at not just securing Muslim League membership but placing himself safely within it, in a position of importance. Haq did not abandon his suspicion and dislike, as far as Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin were concerned, when he joined the Bengal League. A lesser evil than the Congress, as he saw them, Haq prepared to overshadow them in the Bengal League by sheer strength of popularity, and it is in this context that Haq's blatant anti-Hindu speech should be understood. When Haq joined the Muslim League the Bengal chapter had not even been revived. In fact it was only 26 October that Jinnah appointed a 20-member Organizing Committee to set up a Provincial Branch in Bengal. However Bengal had many Muslim League men. The League Parliamentary Board of Bengal was for all practical purposes a Muslim League organ, and in fighting the election, administering through the coalition ministry, and setting up a network of provincial branches, these League men had shown their mettle.⁶⁸ Haq may have felt threatened by Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy but there was no denying their administrative acumen, their brilliant conduct in the Assembly, their sharp retorts to opposition remarks. It may have been hard luck for Haq that the Bengal League was the only party capable of standing up to the Congress in the Assembly, and the only party that showed promise of capturing the imagination of the Muslim people just as KPP had shown, in the past.

⁶⁸ ———, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh, Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2003), p83.