

Yahya Khan Takes Over

When Ayub Khan resigned in March 1969 due to mass protests, he handed over power to General Yahya Khan. Yahya immediately imposed **martial law**, which meant the constitution was suspended, assemblies were dissolved, and all power was concentrated in his hands. He became both the **President** and the **Chief Martial Law Administrator**. To gain public trust, he promised to hold fair elections and restore democracy. The people, who were unhappy with Ayub Khan, welcomed him at first. Yahya presented himself as a neutral figure above party politics, claiming he would unite the country.

Political Reforms

After taking over, Yahya Khan introduced reforms that gave people hope. In **March 1970**, he announced the **Legal Framework Order (LFO)**, which provided the structure for holding general elections. For the first time, elections were to be based on **adult franchise**, meaning every adult had the right to vote. He promised that after elections, power would be transferred to the elected representatives. Political parties were given freedom to campaign and participate, which was not possible under Ayub's dictatorship. At this stage, Yahya's image was positive, and people saw him as someone restoring democracy.

General Elections 1970

The general elections were held in **December 1970** under the LFO. These were historic because they were the **first general elections in Pakistan's history based on adult voting rights**. The results were surprising: in **East Pakistan**, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's **Awami League** won almost all seats (160 out of 162), giving him a clear majority in the National Assembly. In **West Pakistan**, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's **Pakistan People's Party (PPP)** emerged as the strongest party. According to democratic principles, the Awami League should have formed the government, but Yahya Khan and Bhutto resisted transferring power. This created strong resentment in East Pakistan, where people felt their victory was being stolen.

Crisis in East Pakistan

The refusal to hand over power caused a huge political crisis. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched a **non-cooperation movement**, and people in East Pakistan completely rejected Yahya's authority. Strikes, protests, and demonstrations spread across the province. Yahya tried to negotiate with Mujib and Bhutto, but the talks failed. Instead of finding a political solution, Yahya chose the military option. In **March 1971**, he ordered a military operation in East Pakistan to suppress the Awami League and its supporters. This led to violence, killings, and destruction, pushing the situation into a full-blown **civil war**.

Fall of Yahya Khan

The civil war in East Pakistan soon drew India into the conflict. In **December 1971**, India intervened militarily, supporting Bengali fighters (Mukti Bahini). Pakistani forces in East

Pakistan were surrounded and forced to **surrender on 16 December 1971** in Dhaka. This was the biggest tragedy in Pakistan's history as **East Pakistan became Bangladesh**. After this defeat, Yahya Khan lost all credibility and resigned. He handed over power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Yahya's rule is remembered with mixed views—he introduced reforms like the LFO and adult franchise elections, but his poor decisions, especially delaying power transfer and launching a military operation, led to the breakup of Pakistan.