

most powerful figures in Bangladesh. Ershad is credited with having convinced the ailing 76-year-old Sattar to take the reins of power and to run as the candidate for President of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the party established by Ziaur Rahman. After the elections Ershad staked his claim to power by demanding the establishment of a "National Security Council" with the three military chiefs, the President, Vice-President, and Prime Minister which would function as a civilian-military "super-cabinet."

Sattar, apparently still in the flush of his electoral victory, rejected this demand and instead constituted a National Security Council with three military and six civilian members. His rejection of General Ershad's demands created a rift between the civilian government and the military and led to widespread rumors of a military coup in early February.

President Sattar's problems have been compounded by his inability to keep the BNP united. Founded by General Ziaur Rahman in 1978 to build up his political base and "civilianize" his regime, the BNP is a heterogeneous party with factions recruited from other parties. While Zia's strong rule was able to keep a balance among the various groups in the BNP, Sattar has relied primarily on a right-wing faction led by Prime Minister Shah Azizur Rahman for his base of support. Shah Azizur was part of the small group of Bangladeshi politicians who opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and he and his allies are identified with the Islamic fundamentalists in the Jamaate Islami.

As a result, about 70 of the BNP's total of 206 Members of Parliament have openly broken with Sattar. One dissident leader I met bitterly criticized Sattar for having undermined the BNP's own base of popular support by relying on the Shah Azizur group. "Though I think we should accommodate some of the small minority of misguided elements who opposed Bangladesh's liberation, Sattar is discrediting the BNP," he noted. "The people don't like collaborationists [those who collaborated with Pakistan against Bangladesh's independence—P.Z.] to be running the government."

Others discounted the role of the BNP dissidents. "They are a bunch of opportunists who are upset over Sattar's refusal to include them in his cabinet," an Asian diplomat in Dacca told me. At the same time there are reports that the dissidents are being egged on by the armed forces, who are using them as leverage to force Sattar to yield to their demands for a greater share of power. This view was strengthened when General Ershad, in a series of statements after the election, attacked the government for including "anti-liberation" elements, i.e., the Shah Azizur faction of the BNP.

However, in early February Sattar yielded to some of these pressures by quietly restructuring the National Security Council, as demanded by the armed forces, and

A political profile of Bangladesh

For almost two centuries the area encompassed by what is now Bangladesh was looted extensively by the British East India Company—the employer of Thomas Malthus—and its successor, the British Empire. Simultaneously the land-tenure structure and all native industries were destroyed. To prevent the well-developed weaving industry—which produced the world-famous Dacca muslin—from competing with English textiles, the British resorted to a simple measure: they broke the hands of the Dacca weavers.

At the time of independence from Britain in 1947, the area that is now Bangladesh was partitioned off from India on the basis of its majority Muslim population, and became East Pakistan, the poorest of Pakistan's provinces and over 1,000 miles from the seat of government in West Pakistan.

Economic exploitation by West Pakistan and efforts to impose Urdu as the major language on the Bengali-speaking population led to a movement for the autonomy of East Pakistan. When in 1971 the military rulers in West Pakistan responded with a campaign of systematic slaughter, East Pakistan launched a liberation struggle which a few months later culminated in the establishment of an independent, secular Bangladesh with the support of India and the Soviet Union. Under Henry Kissinger's direction the United States sided with the Pakistani military rulers and their allies in Peking.

Since 1971 Bangladesh has led a troubled existence with numerous coups and counter-coups, especially after 1975 when independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family were brutally assassinated in a coup led by a small group of army officers. In the aftermath of the assassination of Mujib, General Ziaur Rahman, then Army Chief of Staff, assumed control and was able to maintain political stability in the years that followed by ruthlessly putting down subsequent military uprisings, eliminating potential opponents, and suppressing political activity.

A gradual process of "democratization" was introduced in 1979 but the relative stability achieved under Ziaur Rahman was shattered last May when he was assassinated.