

Storm clouds over Bangladesh

Lack of economic development resources is at the root of the current political upheavals, reports Ramatanu Maitra.

Student demonstrations erupted on all major university campuses in Bangladesh during January and February, creating a serious challenge to the 11-month-old government of Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) Lt. Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad. The government's fierce response resulted in at least five dead and hundreds wounded. The issue was the Ershad government's effort to carry out a policy of "Islamicization."

General Ershad's pro-Islam push is motivated at least in part by the aim of tapping funds from the oil-rich Arab nations to shore up Bangladesh's collapsed economy, since this nation of 95 million has been subjected to the most destructive regimen of IMF conditionalities. But Ershad may lose his government along with the hoped-for Arab funds. As the student response shows, any effort to impose an alien religious-cultural identity on the secular, Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh, whose culture is rooted in the subcontinent, is not just foolish and backward, but is a project that is doomed to fail. In the process, the chance to make the kinds of urgent economic reforms necessary in Bangladesh will be lost.

With the conditions prevailing in the northeastern region of the subcontinent, it is particularly crucial that Bangladesh establish a stable economy. The recent upheavals which resulted in insane massacres in Assam have their root in the immense poverty that reigns in the region. As chairman of the Group of 77 developing nations, moreover, Bangladesh should be expected to set an example of leadership in this regard.

The language issue

The recent trouble in Bangladesh started in early January, when, at the recommendation of Education Minister Majid Khan, General Ershad proposed the introduction of Arabic, along with Bengali and English, as a compulsory subject for primary education. Majid Khan, who had a long career as a diplomat in the Middle East, is noted for his Arab connections.

The move provoked an immediate hostile reaction not only among the students but also among opposition leaders, who criticized Ershad for his efforts to impose an "alien culture" on Bangladesh. Sporadic incidents in universities in Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Chittagong led to organized clashes between the local police and student federations. In Dhaka

University, in particular, the hostilities took an ugly turn when Islamic Chhatra Shibir, the pro-Islam student group which supports the government in its move for Islamization and the concurrent program of introducing Arabic into the education system, became a natural target for the 14-party Chhatra Sangram Parishad. The latter denounced the CMLA's decision to give Arabic the central position in education and called for immediate restoration of democracy.

Ershad's burst of religious enthusiasm also created tension between the ruling military and the democratic opposition. Maj. Gen. Abdur Rahman, a zonal martial law administrator and a close associate of Ershad, threatened the opposition with a military backlash if they support the "rowdy student elements." Gen. Ershad himself told newsmen on Feb. 7 that martial law regulations will be tightened in the future to prevent growing disturbances. This statement provoked former President Abdus Sattar, who in a statement on the same day alleged that the "military government has failed in its mission" to unify the country and lead the country out of the economic depression it promised.

Within a week political leaders were rounded up and a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed in Dhaka. Amongst the leaders arrested was Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh. According to reports, Sheikh Hasina Wazed was driven off to an undisclosed destination in a military van. Several hundred students were taken to a summary martial law court and put to jail.

Despite the fact that six universities were shut down and leading opposition leaders were arrested, violent clashes continued to occur in Dhaka, Noakhali, and Chittagong.

A deeper meaning

To observers of Bangladesh's internal politics, the reaction of the student community has a deeper meaning. In 1952, when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan (and was known as East Pakistan), the ruling Muslim league government of Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin had declared that Urdu should be the only state language. Mass student rallies against the proposal were held all over East Pakistan, and on Feb. 21, 1952, 26 students were killed in a clash with police. This massacre aggravated the situation, and the demand for recognizing Bengali as East Pakistan's language was pressed more

strenuously. Mighty demonstrations featuring black banners moved through the towns of the province.

Finally, in 1954, after the united front of opposition parties dealt a crushing electoral defeat to the Muslim League, Bengali was declared one of the state languages of Pakistan, particularly since 1971, when Bangladesh became an independent nation after a brutal war of liberation, Feb. 21 is known as *Shaheed Divas* (Martyr's Day) and has become a day to re-pledge commitment for Bangladeshis.

Despite the clear message from the students, General Ershad resolved to plunge ahead. He made known his displeasure at the "non-Islamic way" that the Shaheed Divas is observed. Opposition leaders were quick to point out that the general, who had remained in the Pakistani army until 1971 and immigrated to Bangladesh only after the war of liberation was over, had apparently missed a vital phase in Bangladesh's movement for independence and nationhood which took the form of the population's refusal to accept "alien culture."

Seeking 'Islamic' identity

This is not the first opportunity that General Ershad has had to learn the population's views on this matter in his 11 months of military rule. In order to identify his nation with the "Islamic nations," Ershad sent an ambassador to so-called Democratic Kampuchea—the coalition of rebel groups backed by China and led in fact by the deposed murderer Pol Pot that is challenging the Cambodian government of Heng Samrin. In this, Ershad was only following the nod of the Islamic potentate Gen. Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan. China, which recently promised Ershad \$5 million worth of arms, and Malaysia goaded Ershad on to recognize Democratic Kampuchea. Incredibly, General Ershad seems oblivious of the fact that Pol Pot and his murderous Khmer Rouge, which forms the military arm of Democratic Kampuchea, had slaughtered Khmer Moslems during its regime.

In a March 1981 article in the French monthly *Sudestasie*, M. Hoang gave a vivid account of the atrocities Pol Pot committed against Khmer Moslems and described the wholesale slaughter of Cham villagers. The article stated: "Of the 108 mosques to be found in Cambodia before April 17, 1975, not one remained three years later. The two mosques of Phnom Penh were dynamited. Others were converted into pigsties. Koranic texts and Islamic books were seized and burned."

The Islamization initiatives are taking the Ershad government in the opposite direction from its urgent central task; putting Bangladesh's devastated economy back on its feet. There is no doubt that some of the frustrations the population recently expressed are connected to the economic holocaust that this young nation, in the grip of the World Bank and IMF, is going through.

A question of survival

At a government-sponsored economics seminar in Dhaka

last month, Bangladesh's Finance and Planning Minister A. M. A. Muhith expressed a similar concern. He said: "Without growth we simply cannot survive or maintain the fabric of the society. The demographic investment required in Bangladesh is about 8 percent of GDP, whereas our savings ratio is only 4 to 5 percent of GDP."

What Muhith is concerned about can be seen by taking a hard look at the recent review of the Second Five-Year Plan (1980-85). In December, the Planning Commission unceremoniously slashed the draft plan outlay from \$11.4 billion to \$5.0 billion, a 60 percent reduction in development expenditures. Further, it was announced at the time that 60 percent of the slashed budget would be financed by domestic resources and the rest through foreign resources.

Although the strategy of the plan, which emphasizes overall development of agriculture, irrigation, and energy with a revised projected overall growth of 5 percent, remained the same, its inadequacy is explicit if one examines conditions in Bangladesh.

Negative economic growth

Bangladesh has been held hostage to the International Monetary Fund since 1981, when the Fund froze the SDR credits committed to the government to help ease its balance-of-payments deficit, and ordered the government to slash spending and credit. Under the IMF gun, Bangladesh has successively chopped down subsidies on food and raised prices on irrigation equipment, fertilizer, and petroleum products—essentials in this poor agricultural nation. The government has also successively slashed the annual development plans—last year by \$200 million.

Moreover, the world economic depression is rapidly draining the country's foreign exchange reserves—revenues decrease as a result of the collapsed markets for jute and other primary commodities upon whose export Bangladesh depends; costs rise for imported goods. Bangladesh moved into 1983 with zero economic growth in 1982.

Yet, at an early December meeting of the National Council for Export, General Ershad himself said: "We shall have to depend progressively on our resources and that only can be done through more foreign exchange earnings through exports." This is not simply a fantasy, in light of the present state of export markets; this is the dictate of the IMF. It is a prescription to maintain Bangladesh as a backward, underdeveloped colony, in effect, an exporter of raw and agricultural commodities. It is a prescription for keeping Bangladesh as a looting ground whose population survives on a subsistence living standard.

Particularly disturbing about last year's economic results is the fact that the agricultural sector, the basis for whatever industry and exports Bangladesh has, itself contributes 54 percent toward the national income and employs 74 percent of the labor force. Moreover, Bangladesh is short of food, and intense efforts must be made to mechanize agricultural production, the only way surplus food can be produced.