

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Bangladesh to hold elections in '84

General Ershad's move to end martial law comes amid growing pressures from within Bangladesh and its neighbors.

Facing a rush of populist demands for restoration of democracy at an early date, Bangladesh Chief Martial Law Administrator Gen. H. M. Ershad announced on Nov. 12 that the presidential election will be held on May 24 next year, to be followed by a parliamentary poll on Nov. 25. Some opposition groups have already rejected Ershad's proposal, demanding simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections.

Ershad's Nov. 12 announcement followed a series of violent demonstrations on the nation's campuses. At Rajshahi University, 29 students were hurt in clashes with armed police during a six-hour general strike called by the opposition parties. Earlier, a 15-party meeting held in Dhaka planned a Nov. 1 nationwide protest day against martial law.

The political situation within Bangladesh has remained unstable since the murder of President Ziaur Rahman by a group of army officers in 1981. No political party has succeeded in capturing the people's imagination. Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalists and the Communist Party are recruiting new cadres; both groups were represented at a July conference near Dhaka, where a restoration of democracy was demanded.

The opposition has presently rallied around the late President Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikhha Hassina Wazed, and Khaled Zia, widow of the slain President Ziaur Rahman. Recently Sheikhha Hassina's Awami League Party underwent another split when pro-Soviet Awami leader Abdul Razzak was expelled from the party.

As the Awami League was preparing to expel him, Razzak organized a mass rally calling for "socialism along the path of Sheik Mujaibur Rahman." Thousands of Awami League supporters attended the rally. Since then, Razzak has formed a new party, calling it the Awami League Party.

Within the general population, Sheikhha Hassina's stock is not as high as would be expected for the daughter of Bangladesh's martyred national father. In West Germany when her father was assassinated in 1975, Sheikhha Hassina chose to stay in India until 1981, and many in Bangladesh connect her automatically with Indian interests. In Bangladesh politics, both the India factor and the Pakistan factor play a major role.

The greatest threat to military rule is not the opposition but the students. Since 1947, when this part of the subcontinent became East Pakistan, and since 1971, when Bangladesh became a sovereign nation, most of the governments have had run-ins with the well-organized student community. General Ershad has had his share. Last February, students rejecting his suggestion for the "Islamicization" of Bangladesh unleashed a violent demonstration that spread from Dhaka to Chittagong and Rajshahi and forced the authorities to close down the universities. The violence claimed four lives and shook up the regime.

General Ershad dropped his concept of Islamicization and made peace with the students. However, within the army, fundamentalist officers, some of whom were Ershad's close associates, reacted to Ershad's change in

policy and attempted a coup in early July. In response, Ershad removed Maj. Gen. Mohabbat Jan Choudhury and Maj. Gen. Abdur Rahman—the two most powerful fundamentalist officers in the coup leaders.

But Ershad has not been able to quell populist demands for democracy, and seems to have made some concessions in order to retain power in some form. The split within the Awami League will tend to alleviate some pressure on Ershad, since it not only weakened the party, but also removed the pro-Moscow Abdul Razzak, whom the army distrusts totally. General Ershad's recent announcement that the government will build a memorial of national independence in Mujib Nagar has been seen as an overture to the Awami League.

Ershad also faces mounting pressure on the issue of Bangladeshi emigration to India, which, India charges, has climbed steeply in the past year. Bangladesh has denied the charge.

The Indian government has declared that it intends to build a barbed-wire fence all around the border between the two countries—an idea the Bangladesh government strenuously opposes. The Ershad government cites a 1975 Indo-Bangladesh agreement which says that no defensive structure should be raised within 150 yards of the boundary. Bangladesh leaders also feel that besides isolating their country physically, the fence would belittle them by spreading the impression that large numbers of Bangladeshis are anxious to flee their country.

It is generally considered, however, that Ershad has handled himself well in dealing with his giant neighbor. After a meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh joint economic commission in August, both nations agreed to expand economic cooperation, with emphasis on improving telecommunications and airlinks between the two countries.