

# Ershad versus the fundamentalists

*Susan Maitra writes from New Delhi on the Bangladesh government's efforts to separate the responsible political opposition from the Soviet-backed Islamic fundamentalists.*

Bangladesh leader Lt.-Gen. H. M. Ershad has taken bold political measures to quell the violence that broke out following his announcement in mid-November of elections next year. First came the forced expulsion on Nov. 30 of 18 personnel from the Soviet embassy in the capital of Dhaka and the closing of the Soviet "cultural center." The Soviet Union had 100 people stationed in Dhaka, 36 of them accredited "diplomats," while the United States maintains only a 24-person embassy. The U.S.S.R. is infamous for its practice of overstaffing its embassies and consulates with KGB agents.

A week later Ershad released from custody the two leaders of the umbrella coalitions of the country's 22 opposition parties: Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, and Khaleda Zia, widow of the assassinated former president Ziaur.

With this action, Ershad is attempting to separate out the responsible opposition leadership from the Soviet-centered provocateurs who have stirred up the violence. As early as July this year, Soviet-backed leftists and Islamic fundamentalists held a combined conference where they plotted out the destabilization of the Ershad government.

Ershad also declared himself President on Dec. 7, after he had announced on Nov. 28 the formation of his own political party, the Jana Dal. Ershad said the Jana Dal is based on four principles: nationalism, Islamic ideals and values, democracy, and progress. One of the party's seven main objectives is to increase the political participation of the armed forces in the country's government.

Since the formation of Jana Dal, large-scale disturbances have broken out all over the country. In Chittagong, a port city in eastern Bangladesh, at least one person was killed when police opened fire on demonstrators who were setting fire to navy patrol cars. Since then violence has diminished, but the discontent still simmers.

Ershad has vowed that martial law will not be lifted again until after the 1984 elections. Bangladesh has been under martial law since March 1982, when army chief Ershad took

power after a bloodless coup against the government of Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader President Abdus Sattar. Although demands to lift martial law have continued through these 20 months, the 22 political opposition parties failed to unite over a common program.

The Bangladeshis' deep mistrust of the military and of Islam has roots in the 1971 liberation movement. It is the Pakistani military's insane killing of the local people which remains vivid in their memory. Ershad spent the liberation struggle period in West Pakistan and became an expatriate after Bangladesh became a nation.

## Islamic fundamentalism?

The opposition has charged the Ershad government with pushing "Islamicization" in coordination with Mideastern countries Bangladesh depends on for economic aid, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The strongest challenge to Ershad came last February after the government tried to make Arabic and English compulsory at the primary school level. The government explained that this would make Bangladeshis better able to secure jobs in the Middle East. When this policy was made known, the campuses erupted against the attempted "Islamicization." On the morning of Feb. 14, more than 25,000 students in Dhaka marched toward the secretariat, where Ershad lives and works. When the marchers were intercepted by the police, a bloody battle ensued in which at least four students were killed and more than 100 injured. Soon after, Ershad withdrew the policy, and an uneasy truce between the army and the students was established.

In reality, Ershad has been battling *against* Islamic fundamentalist forces within the army, including some former colleagues of his. Following an attempted coup in June of this year, Ershad stripped a number of high army officers of their posts, including Major-Gen. M. Chowdhury, the home minister, and Major-Gen. Abdur Rahman, commander of the Dhaka garrison, because of their involvement in promoting Islamicization.

Ershad also expelled the Saudi ambassador 15 months

ago for interfering in the country's religious affairs, when the ambassador denounced allegedly "un-Islamic" practices in Bangladesh.

Long before Ershad came to power, President Ziaur Rahman, considered by most Bangladeshis an ardent nationalist, had befriended the Arab nations and sought financial assistance from them. It is also reported that the fundamentalist Al-Badr group had been allowed to flourish in Dhaka since the days of Ziaur Rahman.

Opposition leaders, backed by the campus leaders, formed various alliances to use the momentum of the February clash to mount pressure on Ershad to lift martial law and restore democracy. A 15-party alliance led by Sheikh Hasina Wazed, president of the largest faction of the Awami League and daughter of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, and a 7-party alliance led by Khaleida Zia, senior vice-president of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and widow of President Ziaur, assassinated in May 1981, demanded an immediate end to martial law and the return of the army to the barracks. Other demands included the restoration of democracy and fundamental rights; an end to all restrictions on political activity; election to parliament by this winter, and transfer of power to the people's representatives; release of all political prisoners and trial of those responsible for the student-police clash in February; and compensation to the families of those killed by police.

Ershad responded to some of these demands. He lifted press censorship, relaxed martial law, allowed political activities, and lifted some curbs on the trade unions. He announced an 18-point program covering economic and social development, especially in the rural sector. Finally on Nov. 12, he announced that next May 24 direct elections for the presidency will take place. He set Nov. 25, 1984, for elections to the 300-member parliament. Both the opposition alliances summarily rejected his proposal, insisting on holding presidential elections first, followed by parliamentary elections. Their goal is to change the Bangladesh constitution to abolish the presidency and create a purely parliamentary system. They called for a week of nationwide demonstrations from Nov. 17-24, and a nationwide general strike on Nov. 28. On that day, the military regime announced the formation of Jana Dal and the wave of violence followed.

Ershad has attempted to broaden his base of popular support through policies of reducing bureaucratic delays and inefficiency in administration. He has been touring the rural areas urging the people not to vote for "the politicians," and it would not be surprising if his supporters won these local elections hands down.

### Foreign policy polemics

While the opposition charges that Ershad is pandering to the Islamic fundamentalists, he delivered a speech at the 14th Annual Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference in Dhaka in December, denouncing the wealthier nations of the Mideast for not doing enough to aid the poorer countries—such as his

own. He charged that the secretariat of the Organization of Islamic Countries has failed to implement agreed-upon programs, and that the achievements of the countries in it have been negligible in 14 years despite the tremendous wealth many of them have amassed.

Ershad's tongue was honed by the fact that several delegations, particularly the Saudis, had snubbed Bangladesh by refusing to send ministerial-level delegations. The Saudis are still smarting from Ershad's ejection of their ambassador 15 months ago, when he was discovered making provocative financial and political forays on behalf of the Islamicization of Bangladesh.

Another act that exacerbated the agitation against Ershad was his recent trip to the United States, where he met with President Reagan. That trip has been scored by the left in both Bangladesh and neighboring India. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) newspaper *People's Demonstration* of Nov. 20 accused Ershad of discussing with Reagan "not only the internal affairs of his own country, but the bilateral issues between Bangladesh and India as well, such as the Ganga water dispute." The article claimed that Ershad, speaking before the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "gave the shameful assurance that all nationalized enterprises in Bangladesh would shortly be returned to private hands."

The Indian left's attack on the Ershad government took a more violent turn in Calcutta on Dec. 3 when the All-India Student Federation, a student wing of the Communist Party of India, allegedly threw bombs and stones at the Bangladesh deputy high commissioner's office and burned Ershad in effigy. This occurred three days after the expulsion of Soviet diplomats from Bangladesh.

Ershad has dealt skillfully with regional issues, such as Bangladesh's relations with neighboring India. During his 20-month rule, Indo-Bangladeshi talks have proceeded cordially on unresolved issues such as the sharing of Ganga waters, and providing the corridors through Bangladesh to connect the north of the Indian state of West Bengal with the rest of the state. Last August in a two-day meeting of the Indo-Bangladeshi joint economic commission, it was agreed to expand and accelerate cooperation in economic, commercial, and industrial fields, with special emphasis on improving telecommunication and air links. It is generally admitted in India that Ershad's administration has shown greater interest than that of any previous Bangladesh leader in resolving the outstanding issues with India.

But in the present crisis, Ershad has received no vocal support from neighboring India. The Indian state of Assam is putting pressure on New Delhi to stop the inflow of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Ershad has expressed resentment at Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's announcement that India will put up a fence along the Assam-Bangladesh border. In early December, the chief minister of Tarapura, leader of the ruling CPI-M government there, repeated earlier accusations that Bangladesh was training armed guerrillas for insurgency operations in northeast India.