

From New Delhi by Paul Zykofsky

After the Bangladesh coup

India fears a regional "tilt" toward instability, Islamic fundamentalism, and further economic disintegration.

Despite the initial calm and relatively few arrests following Gen. H. M. Ershad's March 24 bloodless coup in Bangladesh, political leaders in Bangladesh and in India fear that the takeover will be the latest in a series of violent government changes that have driven that country of 90 million people into greater famine, economic chaos, and political turmoil. Added to this are fears that Islamic fundamentalists partial to the Khomeini-allied Pakistan government of General Ziaul Haq might use the instability to gain political power. And observers in both Bangladesh and India emphasize that the growing instability makes more likely political intervention by countries outside the region into a zone of super-power contention, particularly because Indo-Pakistani tension is already heightened.

Part of the fear that growing instability inside Bangladesh could create the conditions for the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist, pro-Pakistani forces, who have a strong following in both the military and some political groups.

General Ershad's policies are as yet unclear. Thus far Ershad has tried to avoid antagonizing either the Islamic fundamentalist forces or the other major political force in Bangladesh, the Awami League, which under Sheik Mujibur Rahman led the liberation war to free East Pakistan from West Pakistan to create Bangladesh. The Awami

League still has the greatest following amongst the population.

Ershad himself was one of the East Pakistani generals who stayed in West Pakistan during the war of liberation. Yet, he does not seem today to be part of the most extreme pro-Pakistan groups within Bangladesh, and is not a member of the Bangladesh branch of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Muslim Brotherhood) which rules Pakistan under dictator Ziaul Haq. Ershad had criticized the 75-year-old caretaker President Abdus Sattar, whom he overthrew, for bringing Jamaat-associated politicians around Prime Minister Shah Azizur into the government.

Since the coup, Ershad has arrested about 200 people. While members of the Jamaat have been among those arrested, the core group around Shah Azizur has so far been left untouched. On the other hand, Ershad has also not arrested members of the Awami League. Indeed, when this reporter was in Bangladesh weeks prior to the coup, there were reports that a faction of the Awami League party had secretly made a deal with Ershad in support of his coup bid. Another faction of the party opposed any such deal with Ershad because identification with the armed forces could seriously undermine mass support for the party.

First claiming he had no political ambition, Ershad in later press conferences announced that he hoped to restore civilian rule within

two years, and if the population then wants his leadership, "I will surely come but not in uniform."

That the army took over is no surprise, as I reported in *EIR* March 30. For some time the armed forces had been demanding a greater share of the power, especially after the election held last November to pick a successor to President Ziaur Rahman, who was assassinated during a May 30 uprising by a faction within the army. In the aftermath of the assassination, Army Chief of Staff Ershad rallied the armed forces to ensure the succession of the 75-year-old Sattar. When, after the election, Sattar unexpectedly rejected the military's demand for a share of the power, Ershad stepped up the pressure.

By February Sattar had acceded to Ershad's demand for a National Security Council consisting of three military chiefs, the President, Vice-President, and Prime Minister to oversee the functioning of the cabinet. But rumors were already widespread in Bangladesh that a coup was imminent.

Political observers in South Asia say it is doubtful how long Ershad can hold the situation under control, despite his use of the slogans and songs of the Bangladesh liberation era to try to appeal to the population. At present instability is heightened because there is a serious danger of a food shortage and possible famine in the aftermath of a crop failure and a cutback in the foreign aid on which Bangladesh is dependent.

In the past, the stability of food supplies and the stability of governments has been closely connected. The mass irrigation projects that could resolve the food problem are not on the immediate agenda.