

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A blow struck for democracy

The Bangladesh parliamentary elections are a step to rebuilding the country's political process.

The final results of the first parliamentary election in seven years will not be known until at least May 19, when the polling is completed in 36 constituencies where "irregularities" prevented completion of the vote on election day, May 7. But one thing is certain: Politics is alive and well in this tiny, densely populated nation ruled by martial law under "dictator" Lt.-Gen. H. M. Ershad since 1982.

Nearly 1,500 candidates contested for 300 parliamentary seats. About 1,100 candidates represented some 28 out of Bangladesh's 120-odd political parties (92 parties chose to boycott the elections), and about 400 independents ran. The percentage turnout of Bangladesh's 47.6 million voters is not known, but the aggressive campaign against *the elections led by the opposition Bangladesh National Party* (BNP) included violence and hooliganism and may have blunted participation.

Of the 264 seats counted, the pro-Ershad government Jatiya Party front was credited with 132, the Awami League-led opposition front with 90, the Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim League with 10 and 3 seats respectively. Independents won the balance of 27 seats. This has left Ershad's party 19 seats short of an absolute majority, but some of the re-pollled seats, together with some of the independents, are expected to give his party a working government.

Vote-fraud allegations against the Jatiya Party by a British parliamentary team invited to observe by the Awami

League's "People's Commission for Free Elections" have been used to give an aura of the "Philippines syndrome" to the election. But by the typically chaotic, rough-and-tumble standards of Third World electoral politics—and politics in Bangladesh in particular—the election does not appear to have been out of bounds.

It is not unlikely, in fact, that the most mischief was actually done by the BNP-led boycotters. The BNP had the most to lose from successful elections, no matter the outcome. Lacking the political organization and depth to mount an election campaign, the BNP is, as Awami League leader Hasina Wajed has pointed out, beholden to a new military coup to bring it to power.

Founded by the late Gen. Ziaur Rahman when he was President of Bangladesh (1975-81), the BNP is backed by a section of the Army. The party and its seven-member alliance, including assorted Maoist sects, are led by Khaleda Zia, Rahman's wife. Khaleda Zia, who peppers her speeches with references to the threat of an "Indo-Soviet axis," operates from within the Army cantonment, where she resides.

The elections were an important step from martial law back to democracy in Bangladesh. The credit goes equally to General Ershad, who has been trying for three years in the face of cynicism and political irresponsibility to make this step, and to Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed, who had the courage and political maturity to take up the challenge.

The daughter of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation hero and first President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hasina took over the party her father had founded after his murder in a 1975 coup. The party has come to be associated with a "pro-India" and "pro-Soviet" stance.

Hasina's 1986 decision to abandon the boycott and participate in the elections led to the break-up of the opposition coalition with the BNP-led group as well as the eventual split-up of her own 15-party alliance. The BNP combine re-aligned with various leftist and other parties and the powerful Dhaka University radical student community against the Awami League. Hasina brooked charges of a "secret deal" with President Ershad and a "sell-out" of the anti-martial law campaign.

"We have accepted the election as a challenge to add a new dimension to the anti-martial movement," Hasina countered the charges. "In fact, we are going to take part in the polls not for power," she said, explaining that the elections would be a referendum to end martial law and establish a representative government.

Interestingly, reports here are that the tiny but influential Communist Party of Bangladesh, a member of the Awami League combine, was one of the key voices in persuading Hasina to take up the poll challenge. The opposition alliance had been insisting on five demands, including repeal of martial law and establishment of a neutral, caretaker government, as preconditions for elections.

President Ershad steadfastly refused the latter demand, but abandoned his insistence on a presidential probe preceding the parliamentary elections. He also agreed to lift large chunks of martial-law authority to facilitate vigorous and full electoral politicking.