

Bangladesh's Ershad decrees emergency

by Ramtanu Maitra

What began as a periodical exercise by Bangladesh's opposition—demanding that President Hussain Mohammad Ershad quit and hold elections for Parliament—has suddenly mushroomed into a nationwide crisis. President Ershad clamped down an emergency on Nov. 27 following a short nationwide address. He also detained two major opposition leaders, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed. By Nov. 28, violence had erupted in many towns, and a pitched gun battle between pro- and anti-Ershad students was raging for four days at Dhaka University campus. From available reports, it is evident that Ershad, Bangladesh's longest-serving President who grabbed power in a 1982 "peaceful coup," is facing hard days ahead. One obvious indicator is the report that the opposition movement, which is usually contained within Dhaka, has spread to engulf Chittagong, Mymensingh, Khulna, and Rajshahi. All incidents now rapidly spiral into violent clashes between anti-Ershad militants and security forces.

One reason, often cited by analysts, why the opposition has succeeded in making this a nationwide movement, is the fact that the two largest opposition blocs, the seven-party alliance under the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) chief Begum Khaleda Zia and the eight-party alliance under Sheikh Hasina Wazed's Awami League Party, have come together after years of quibbling and joined hands to bring down Ershad's government. The initiative has resulted in combining the students, the most volatile political ingredient in Bangladesh, under a common banner of the All Party Students' Unity (APSU)—a development which has kept the pressure on the parent organizations under the two fiery woman leaders.

The recent events burst forth following an Oct. 10 incident in Dhaka near the main mosque, Raitul Mokarram, when security forces fought a pitched battle, trying to prevent the assembled opposition militants from spreading out to surround the government Secretariat. The opposition activists won the battle, leaving 200 injured. Following this, the APSU organized programs in rural areas and subdistricts which led to violent clashes.

Dangerous 'political circus'

President Ershad, who first branded the whole thing a "political circus," got a temporary respite when the events in

the Indian city of Ayodhya on Oct. 30 led to widespread attacks on Hindu minorities in Dhaka and Chittagong. The Ershad government organized peace processions and assured the Hindu minorities of protection. But opposition leaders claimed that the attacks on the minorities were organized by the government itself, in order to blunt the opposition's efforts. Sheikh Hasina Wazed even charged that a number of cabinet ministers, apparently acting on Ershad's behalf, were involved in inciting anti-Hindu sentiments which led to riots and arson in Dhaka and Chittagong. On Nov. 6, citing Articles 51 and 55 of the Constitution, she demanded the President hand over power to a caretaker government to conduct "free and fair" elections. Although the government ridiculed her demand as "childish," it was evident that the agitation had shaken them up. Ershad, who had closed down Dhaka University following the Oct. 10 events, was forced to reopen the schools, including the university, on Nov. 8. On Nov. 20, the opposition blocs organized a successful 48-hour general strike which resulted in more violent incidents. APSU militants tried to attack the homes of allegedly corrupt ministers, deputies, and government officials. The opposition alliance, embarking on a 21-day continuous action plan from Nov. 22, had called for a countrywide blockade for 72 hours Dec. 10-12.

Moreover, Ershad has accused a "neighboring foreign country"—which many analysts think refers to India—of inciting violence in Bangladesh. It is, some point out, standard practice on the subcontinent to make accusations of foreign involvement, when the domestic situation heats up.

However, the President has not run out of cards yet. He has the "Emergency Power Ordinance 1990," which will give him power to suppress all news reports, bring in the Army to deal with the opposition, and close down all educational institutions, impose curfew at will, and order the suspension of certain civil rights. In his 11-minute televised speech, Ershad reiterated his accusation that a foreign country was "inspiring a section of the opposition to indulge in politics of anarchy and destruction in the name of demand."

Ershad is also expected to stir up the old differences between Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed over leadership. However, Begum Khaleda Zia has, on more than one occasion, charged Ershad with involvement in the assassination of her husband, the late President Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rehman, in May 1984. It is also arguable how long the Army will back Ershad.

The spread of agitation may have surprised outsiders, but for some time the government has been the brunt of allegations of plundering foreign aid to feather their own nests. Both Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia had met with World Bank-International Monetary Fund officials in Dhaka on Nov. 6, requesting them to cut off all aid to the "illegitimate government involved in corruption and smuggling." Ershad's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia has also evoked widespread criticism.