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Bangladesh: Ershad's Search for Stability

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An Intelligence Assessment

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October 1983

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Bangladesh: Ershad's Search for Stability

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [Redacted] Office
of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. [Redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, South Asian Division, NESAs,

[Redacted]

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**Bangladesh:
Ershad's Search for Stability**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 September 1983
was used in this report.*

Chief Martial Law Administrator Lt. Gen. H. M. Ershad, who assumed power in March 1982 in a bloodless military coup, is trying to institutionalize his power by becoming Bangladesh's next elected president. To get there, he has to appease a highly politicized military constituency, with widely varying views regarding Ershad's political strategy as well as its own future role in government and, to a lesser degree, the civilian politicians, who view the military as usurpers of power.

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Although we believe Bangladesh's numerous political parties will continue to challenge the legitimacy of Ershad's government and to agitate for a speedier return to civilian rule, we consider them too factionalized to thwart Ershad's presidential aspirations. We believe the military will not return power to weak civilian politicians and will remain the country's only effective political institution—despite a lack of consensus within the military over the extent of its future political involvement.

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Ershad's success in carrying through his strategy is still problematical, but we believe Ershad has to:

- Persuade the military to accept his transition to the presidency and to take a lower profile in a civilian government.
- Establish a political base outside the military, probably through local government leaders and grassroots popular support.
- Acquire some broad-based support among factions that have split from the largely urban-based political parties to add legitimacy to his political aspirations.
- Continue to implement economic reforms that will improve the economy overall and strengthen his own popular support.

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We judge Ershad has a good chance of remaining in power at least until the national elections he has announced for March 1985. We attribute his staying power to his being the least controversial and most senior leader among the other potential military contenders. Although military disunity has hampered Ershad's ability to consolidate his position, we believe it also has worked to his advantage by inhibiting the emergence of cohesive military opposition. Over the longer term, however, we see the highly politicized military as a divisive and destabilizing element in Bangladesh politics.

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Although internal instability is the primary concern of any government in Dhaka, Bangladesh's continuing need for outside economic assistance and stable relations with India are major external pressures. Bangladeshis tend to view problems in relations with New Delhi as a sign that India is attempting to undermine their government. We judge that acquiescence to pressure from New Delhi—such as on the Ganges-Brahmaputra water-sharing problem—would hurt Ershad's domestic political position. Although India would favor the emergence of a more accommodating government in Dhaka, we believe it recognizes that instability in Bangladesh could affect the stability of the entire region. [REDACTED]

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Increased Soviet encouragement of the left to agitate against the Martial Law Administration in Bangladesh concerns the government in Dhaka and has contributed to the deterioration in relations between the two countries. Moscow has the largest diplomatic presence in Bangladesh—over a hundred people—which provides it with the resources to exploit opportunities inherent in the country's unstable politics. We believe that the increased level of Soviet activity in Bangladesh is aimed at checking the military regime's drift to the West and strengthening the leftists' position. The Soviets probably recognize, however, that local pro-Soviet leftists are weak, factionalized, and have little chance of bringing down Ershad's government by themselves. [REDACTED]

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US interests in Bangladesh and the region will not be significantly affected if Ershad succeeds in consolidating his power and becoming the country's elected president. A sharp deterioration in Bangladesh's political stability or economic conditions, however, would have an impact on US interests:

- The need could develop for even larger doses of US economic aid. The United States already has invested more than \$2 billion in food and development aid since Bangladesh's independence.
- Instability in Bangladesh could add to US bilateral problems with India, which pays close attention to the internal situation of its neighbors, should Bangladesh solicit US support in resolving regional disputes. Instability could also heighten tension between India and Pakistan if India tried to assert its regional dominance in Bangladesh.
- Instability in Bangladesh could provide an opportunity for further Soviet involvement in the subcontinent. [REDACTED]

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**Bangladesh:
Ershad's Search for Stability** [Redacted]

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Herculean Challenges

A Legacy of Political Instability

Chief Martial Law Administrator Lt. Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad is striving to stabilize his country's chaotic politics and institutionalize his position. During the country's nearly 12 years of political independence, which followed a bloody nine-month civil war between East and West Pakistan, three leaders have been assassinated, and military coup attempts have been numerous. Bangladesh's founder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was killed in 1975 by junior officers bent on ending what had become a corrupt, ineffective, and violence-plagued government. Mujib's immediate successor remained in power only three days before he was killed in a counter coup. [Redacted]



Chief Martial Law Administrator Arabia ©
Lt. Gen. H. M. Ershad [Redacted]

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In our view, the assassination of the popular Gen. Ziaur Rahman (Zia) in 1981 by a longtime rival in an unsuccessful coup attempt left a gap in Bangladesh's leadership from which the country still has not recovered. Although Zia failed to develop strong political institutions or to resolve the problem of corruption among senior officials, we believe he changed Bangladesh's image from one of hopeless poverty and disorder to that of a lesser developed country successfully attacking its problems. [Redacted]

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Economic Hurdles

Ershad has undertaken bold reforms—which comply with IMF guidelines—to halt severe economic decline caused by a series of poor crops; previous weak economic management; and a poor climate for foreign trade, assistance, and investment. As a result, the Bangladesh Government reports the country's economic growth rate rose from near zero in FY 1982 to 3.8 percent in FY 1983. According to IMF and US Embassy reporting, foreign exchange reserves in the past year increased from \$100 million to \$300 million. The Bangladesh Finance Minister reports food stocks are 30 percent higher than last year. Further, the IMF reports the trade balance deficit was cut from an estimated \$1.9 billion to \$1.6 billion by a slight increase in exports and a cut in imports. [Redacted]

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Effective political power has rested with the military since 24 March 1982, when Lieutenant General Ershad orchestrated a bloodless coup against elected President Sattar, declared martial law, and assumed the position of Chief Martial Law Administrator. Ershad's assumption of power followed months of military dissatisfaction with the aging Sattar and his ineffective handling of Bangladesh's myriad problems. Parliament was dissolved, the constitution suspended, and activity by Bangladesh's numerous political parties banned. [Redacted]

[Redacted] the civilian President, retired judge Abul Fazal Mohammad Ahsanuddin Chowdhury, is only a figurehead. [Redacted]

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A major factor in Ershad's program is significantly greater private-sector activity and reduced public-sector activity. According to the US Embassy, major reforms favorable to the private sector—including the divestiture of the key jute and textile industries—have boosted the confidence of Bangladesh industrialists. Consequently, new capital investment and improvements of existing factories are beginning to pick up. The Embassy further indicates that businessmen have started serious joint-venture negotiations with American manufacturers of food products and equipment.

The Embassy reports that the Bangladesh Government recently announced additional steps to consolidate FY 1983 gains and to strengthen economic policies. The government is working to increase prices paid to local farmers for foodgrains by 8 percent and to reduce subsidies on foodgrains, energy, water, transportation, and health care. Also, the government plans to broaden the national tax base by moving away from reliance on customs and excise duties toward income and direct taxes, institute reforms in the financial sector, and provide incentives to encourage savings. We believe that, if Ershad can accomplish these measures, he will improve the government's domestic financial position, encourage agricultural production, and bring prices more in line with actual costs.

Ershad also is trying to tackle economic problems in the rural areas where they originate. Although Dhaka is the decisionmaking center, it is insulated from the countryside, where the World Bank reports nearly 90 percent of the population lives. According to Bank analysts, poverty and unemployment in rural areas are reinforced by a stratified social and economic system dominated by traditional landlord-peasant relationships. Ershad is counting on his ambitious *thana* reform plan to bring government closer to the people.¹ By subordinating the civil servants to a popularly elected body of village headmen, Ershad hopes to promote more responsive rural development projects and build grassroots political institutions. Land reform focusing on strengthening the rights of the

¹ A *thana* is the equivalent of a county, composed of approximately 200,000 people.

The Population Dilemma

The US Embassy reports that Ershad recognizes that a solution to the problem of an already large and rapidly increasing imbalance between the population and the nation's limited natural resources is critical to long-term political and economic stability. Some 96.5 million Bangladeshis live in a country the size of Wisconsin. Growing at a rate of 2.7 to 3.1 percent, depending on statistical assumptions, the population will double by the first decade of the next century. According to the US Embassy, the government has had little success in implementing its family planning program. Ineffective and lethargic bureaucratic administration of the program, lack of education, deeply ingrained social strictures, and the reluctance of a traditional Muslim society that considers birth control against the will of God are the major barriers to a solution of the staggering population problem.

tenant farmer is another area in which the government is seeking rural improvements. Early implementation of the proposals is unlikely, however, given the tenacity of landowners and the difficulties in enforcing policies in remote rural areas without rigorous supervision and organization.

Despite the government's efforts, the World Bank forecasts a difficult economic period. The Bank does not expect significant improvement in the country's terms of trade or in aid inflows, and the availability of external and domestic resources will remain tight. Bank analysts project only modest rates of real GDP and investment growth and underscore the government's need to develop an effective strategy to sustain the development effort. Economic growth could be hampered further by Bangladesh's growing foreign debt. According to USAID, the ratio of repayment obligations as a percentage of export earnings, worker remittances, and other service earnings could rise from 10.2 percent in FY 1982 to 19.1 percent by FY 1987, unless a number of aid donors write off the debt.

Ershad harvesting rice



Bangladesh Observer ©

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Ershad's Political Strategy

We believe that Ershad, in seeking to continue as leader of Bangladesh, sees himself as a middleman between the military and civilian politicians. He is attempting to construct a political party, not yet officially named and still tenuous, that would have military support and broad-based centrist civilian backing in order to retain power through the transition from military to civilian rule. According to Embassy reporting, he is striving to amass grassroots support and heighten his public role, campaigning over the last year as hard as any politician.

Ershad's leadership style, still unfolding and somewhat naive, will be another factor in determining his political longevity. Ershad, who has only begun to develop a more farsighted political strategy, continues

to react haltingly to problems. Less a charismatic personality or political tactician than Presidents Mujib and Zia, Ershad's strength may lie in his ability to mediate among the many competing elements in Bangladesh. Although he has managed so far to juggle incongruous groups, it is still difficult to determine how adept Ershad will be over a longer period because his "better-than-average" performance so far may be more attributable to circumstance than skill.

In March, Ershad announced an 18-point political and economic program that, according to US Embassy reports, closely parallels the 19-point program the late President Zia issued at the beginning of his

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Ershad with newborn "son" [redacted] Bangladesh Observer ©

political career. To strengthen his image in a country where symbols are important, Ershad "miraculously" has acquired a son after 26 years of a childless marriage, despite the fact that Ershad's wife appeared noticeably unpregnant a week before the alleged birth, [redacted]

The US Embassy reports Ershad is gaining more confidence and is acting with somewhat more political savvy in consolidating his authority to become Bangladesh's next elected president. Following several months of indecision over how to initiate a political process—which included an unproductive attempt at a dialogue with politicians—Ershad publicly has called for phased local elections between December 1983 and March 1984, with national elections to follow in March 1985. [redacted]

To build a base for his still sketchily conceived political organization, Ershad is figuring on grassroots support to strengthen his position and counter the strength that the political parties traditionally have held in the urban areas. Ershad's emphasis on *thana* reform, which appears to us to be a genuine but monumental effort to eradicate rural poverty, will help bolster his image, in our view. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Most problematic for Ershad, in our view, is whether to give the military a formal constitutional role in a civilian government. According to the US Embassy, Ershad knows that maintaining support within all levels of the military is essential to protect his position, and from the start he has advocated strong military participation in government. [redacted]

The US Embassy reports that Ershad is now more conscious of the risks of providing a formal constitutional role for the military. We judge Ershad is most concerned about its limited experience in running the country, its faltering loyalty and disparate views, and its own susceptibility to the very corruption that afflicted civilian politicians. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] Political party opposition to the military's political participation and an attempt to modify the military profile of his government to Western aid donors also may be influencing Ershad's thinking. [redacted]

[redacted] we believe that Ershad has raised the expectations of the majority of the military who may not be satisfied with anything less than a constitutional role. [redacted]

[redacted]

We believe that

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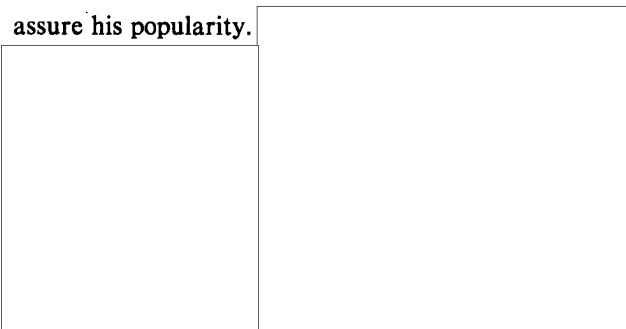
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if Ershad can quietly maneuver to assume the presidency prior to national elections, he stands to improve his credibility and legitimacy. Alternatively, should he force the issue, particularly before he musters sufficient rural support, he could encounter considerable negative reaction from the political parties. If the reaction takes the form of overheated demonstrations and strikes, military opponents of Ershad's political ambitions are likely to push successfully for continued martial law and could convince the military to remove Ershad.

assure his popularity.



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Obstacles to Ershad

To succeed with his strategy, Ershad must counter the problems of appeasing a discordant military, which serves as his main power base, and mollifying civilian political opponents who see the military as having illegally usurped power. Given Ershad's demonstrated caution, moderation, and flexibility, in our view, he has a good chance of holding on to his position.

Recently, Ershad has asserted his authority by transferring two powerful senior generals who have opposed his political strategy. The hardline attitudes of these generals are admired by some military members,



the troops are not likely to turn against Ershad because of these transfers. Maj. Gen. Mohabbat Jan Chowdhury, formerly the Minister of Home Affairs who has been demoted to a less influential position and may eventually be sent out of the country as Bangladesh's Ambassador to China, had used his role to propose political and social policies in keeping with his Islamic conservatism. The abrupt removal of the seemingly hotheaded Maj. Gen. Abdur Rahman, who has been Ershad's most vocal critic and the most obvious power seeker, will give Ershad some maneuverability to implement his strategy more effectively.

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A Tangle of Military Disunity

In our view, military disunity has worked against Ershad by preventing him from consolidating his authority and at times discrediting his image and the policies he is trying to implement. We judge disunity to be worst within the officer corps. The US Embassy reports that Ershad is convinced that President Zia's neglect of the military led to his assassination. Consequently, Ershad has substantially increased military salaries and benefits to win support.



to counter what Ershad perceives as a noncommittal attitude among much of the military regarding his political aspirations, Ershad may carry his campaign to the military cantonments to reaffirm himself as the only viable candidate who will run the country in a manner acceptable to the military and essentially sell them as well on civilian rule.

Although military disunity has hampered Ershad, we believe it has also worked to his advantage by thwarting any cohesive body of military opposition from developing and enabling Ershad to be the one person most acceptable and least threatening to the disparate elements within the military. The advantage to Ershad, in our opinion, of strengthening the military's political involvement is that a body of military representatives could support him in implementing his policies. But Ershad faces a political risk by further politicizing a military that lacks unity, whose intentions and loyalty to him are tangential, and whom

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Ershad has moved cautiously to consolidate his authority, and he still needs a consensus among senior generals to govern. The number and composition of generals who support Ershad and his policies change often, in our view, depending on the issues and the political atmosphere in Dhaka. Even more difficult, Ershad must satisfy the demands of the junior and middle grade officers and enlisted ranks in order to

Military Divisiveness After the 1971 War of Independence

In our view, the military in Bangladesh can make or break any government, but it is not cohesive, and its discipline is mediocre. According to one South Asian scholar, factionalism developed in the military coincidentally with politicization and has weakened its effectiveness as a vehicle of stability. [redacted]

regular Army, and encouraged military disunity. With an approximate strength of 30,000, Mujib's force was supposed to protect villagers against crime. According to one scholar, villagers were in fact often threatened rather than protected by this force. [redacted]

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Historians show politicization of the Bangladesh military is rooted in its initial involvement in the country's liberation struggle against Pakistan, when Ziaur Rahman, then a major in the Pakistan Army, declared independence in Chittagong before slipping away to help found the poorly armed and ill-trained mukti bahini, or freedom fighters. Formed in 1971, this guerrilla force evolved from the paramilitary and security arm of the Awami League, the East Bengali political party from which the independence movement sprang. Following independence in late 1971, the newly formed Bangladesh armed forces consisted of some 17,000 members of the Army, with the Navy and Air Force having perhaps 500 men each, according to one academic source. [redacted]

Although less prominent now, the most basic rift existed between the freedom fighters who were in East Pakistan in 1971 and the returnees who were stationed in West Pakistan, interned there during the war, and not allowed to return to Bangladesh until 1973. The latter resented the fact that what they regarded as their rightful positions had been usurped by freedom fighters who had been granted two years' additional seniority for their involvement in the war. [redacted]

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Another disunifying factor born during the liberation war, but which did not make itself felt until 1975, was the formation of a group of radicalized freedom fighter officers critical of Mujib. These officers were allied to political parties of the left—notably the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party—JSD). According to one South Asian scholar, these elements sought not merely to advance themselves within the new political and military structure, but to rebuild Bangladesh along more radical socialist lines. They concentrated on infiltrating the enlisted ranks, where they still maintain some influence. [redacted]

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After 1971 the military's politicization and factionalism increased and led to its eventual intervention in politics in August 1975 when junior officers and a small group of enlisted men staged the coup in which Sheikh Mujib and his family were killed. In the midst of the chaos following independence and uncertain of the political reliability of many of the former liberation forces, Mujib in 1972 had formed his own private army, the Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini, or national security force. This group's heavyhanded methods aroused resentment among civilians, demoralized the

politicians view as illegitimate usurpers. Ultimately, Ershad will need to continue to develop broad-based military support to remain in power. To accomplish this, he will need to be more assertive in unseating military opponents and will need to co-opt the younger officers who are likely to support whomever they see as beneficial to their own position. [redacted]

Civilian Opponents

Ershad's civilian opponents are likely to continue to push for a return to civilian rule and for earlier general elections, according to the US Embassy. We believe Ershad would not advance the date for the

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general elections, however, because he does not have sufficient support from political party splinter groups and has not consolidated his power within the military. Should Ershad not abide by the election timetable he has announced, however, he risks incurring more criticism not only from the politicians, but also from those factions of the military who are eager to return to the barracks. [redacted]

[redacted] Ershad's political strategy depends on his ability to manipulate the local elections to predetermine the outcome of any future parliamentary and presidential elections. We believe Ershad has a good chance of drawing his support from the rural areas and using that base to develop his own party from center-right politicians. Press reports indicate some civilian political opponents recognize this probability and have begun visiting local districts in an attempt to rally their own support. Nevertheless, we agree with the US Embassy's assessment that the civilian political opposition is so fragmented and disorganized that it will be unable to pose a credible electoral challenge to Ershad. [redacted]

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In our view, Ershad needs some support from established political parties in order for the public to view his regime as legitimate. It is still uncertain whether any of the significant parties would cooperate with a successor regime dominated by military and loyal rural representatives, but we believe that some will be more opportunistic and jump on an Ershad bandwagon, particularly if he fares well in local elections. The leftist parties and their student organizations are likely to challenge an Ershad-led civilian government and may try to forestall such an outcome with demonstrations and strikes. According to the US Embassy, skirmishes between leftist students and the newly formed pro-Ershad student group have already occurred at Dhaka University. We do not believe that the radicals would be able to bring down Ershad without the support of other political party groups and a major issue upon which to focus grievances. [redacted]

External Sources of Instability

Although internal instability is the major problem confronting Ershad, actual and perceived vulnerability to external pressures heightens Bangladeshis' insecurity. Given Bangladesh's military and economic weakness, its primary objectives are to ensure a continued flow of outside assistance and to maintain satisfactory relations with its dominant neighbor, India. To counteract India's regional political dominance and open more channels to economic assistance, Bangladesh cultivates its relations with other Islamic states. The oil-rich Middle Eastern countries are a valuable employer of Bangladesh migrant laborers (approximately 150,000 in 1982, according to official Bangladesh statistics), who send home remittances that bolster the economy.² [redacted]

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It is possible that the major political parties may not participate in any local or national elections in an attempt to discredit Ershad. Even if the major parties do participate in future elections, we believe party infighting, particularly in the Awami League, which led Bangladesh to independence, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, President Zia's party, will further weaken their opposition to an Ershad-led party and their ability to organize a successful campaign. We do not believe they are likely to pose a serious obstacle to Ershad's candidates in the local elections. Even so, in our view, the military will not allow the pro-Indian Awami League to regain power. [redacted]

India: A Difficult Neighbor

Most Bangladeshis are deeply suspicious of India and tend to view problems in relations with New Delhi as a sign that India is attempting to undermine their government. According to the US Embassy, Ershad, while distrusting India, has been forced in his official role to recognize the reality of Indian dominance and has, in our view, tried to approach bilateral problems

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² According to the US Embassy, Bangladesh foreign exchange earnings from worker remittances in FY 1983 were US \$610 million. [redacted]

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[redacted] (See appendix for more details on the political parties.) [redacted]

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with moderation—to the point that some Bangladeshis consider him “soft on India.” Probably in an attempt to counter this perception, Ershad more recently has publicly criticized New Delhi. [redacted]

[redacted]

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In our view, India would no doubt favor a return to power of the Awami League, which with Indian assistance led Bangladesh to independence. [redacted]

In our view, Moscow’s reasons for dabbling in Bangladesh’s internal politics stem from its perception that, because Ershad has not consolidated his control, the Soviets have an opportunity to check Bangladesh’s drift to the West and the Islamic countries and to strengthen the leftists’ position. The Soviets probably recognize, however, that local pro-Soviet leftists are weak, factionalized, and have little chance of bringing down Ershad’s government without some major contributing issue and the support of other political party groups. [redacted]

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[redacted] however, India recognizes that this is not likely to occur. We doubt, however, that India would want the political situation in Bangladesh to deteriorate to a point that would lead to control by radical parties of either extreme. [redacted]

We believe several areas of dispute between Bangladesh and India could strain relations and lead to instability in Bangladesh and regional turmoil on the subcontinent. The most pressing is the water-sharing problem.³ Seasonal water shortages and floods are chronic in Bangladesh, and the overpopulated, largely agrarian society depends heavily on the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, which flow through the country. Because both rivers enter Bangladesh from India, their technical management and control continue to be a sensitive political issue. India already can divert the Ganges away from Bangladesh at the Farakka Barrage. Included in the problem is a controversial Indian proposal for a canal to direct Brahmaputra waters to the Ganges. Although India could accelerate pressure for the canal by refusing to extend the water-sharing agreement, which expires next April, we doubt India would want to push Ershad so hard as to destabilize his regime. We believe New Delhi recognizes that instability in Bangladesh could affect the stability of the entire region. [redacted]

In the aftermath of the military takeover in 1982, both Dhaka and Moscow seemed interested in improving relations that had deteriorated steadily since the assassination in 1975 of independence leader Sheikh Mujib, [redacted]

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[redacted] the Soviets agreed to provide \$76 million in new economic assistance to expand a Soviet-built power plant and to overhaul Bangladesh’s aging squadron of MIG-21s, according to US Embassy reports. Soviet efforts failed, however, to check the Bangladesh Government’s pro-Western attitude, and the Soviets apparently have become unhappy with General Ershad. [redacted]

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A Soviet Angle

[redacted] the Soviets are trying to exploit the fluid internal situation in Bangladesh by encouraging the leftist political parties to increase agitation against the military regime of Ershad. [redacted]

Soviet connections are primarily with the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Bangladesh, the pro-Soviet faction of the Awami League, and, to a lesser extent, the radical *Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal* or National Socialist Party. [redacted]

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Looking ahead, we judge that Soviet involvement with Bangladesh will be tempered by the USSR's more important relationship with India. We believe the Indians would oppose the creation of a Marxist regime on their borders, and the Soviets themselves probably would be unwilling to bear the economic burden of supporting a pro-Soviet Bangladesh, given the country's limited strategic location or other significant payoff for Moscow. [redacted]

Implications for the United States

Bangladesh plays a relatively minor role in US policy, and another government reshuffle or military coup probably would have little impact on immediate US priorities in South Asia. Nevertheless, another change in government, even if favorable to the United States, would counter what little postwar political and economic gains Bangladesh has made and undermine international confidence in the continuity of any future Bangladesh Government. [redacted]

A sharp deterioration in Bangladesh's political and economic situation could affect US concerns in several ways:

- A political or economic breakdown could lead to the need for even larger doses of economic aid. The United States already has given more than \$2 billion in food and development aid since Bangladesh's independence.
- Instability in Bangladesh could foment serious problems in India—given the tendency of Bangladeshis to seek refuge in that country's border states—and, even worse, could heighten regional conflict between India and Pakistan if India tried to assert its regional dominance in Bangladesh.
- Instability in Bangladesh could provide an opportunity for further Soviet meddling in the subcontinent. [redacted]

Outlook

We believe Ershad has a good chance of maintaining sufficient military support over the next year because he is the least controversial and most senior leader among other potential military contenders. Disunity within and among the political parties will preclude a major opposition movement, and even a slight improvement in the still precarious economy will increase his survivability. [redacted]

We judge Ershad's popular credibility will be somewhat strengthened as he moves to dismantle the martial law structure and establish a civilian government. If Ershad delays the promised return to civilian rule, he risks heightened public sentiment against martial law and confrontation with leftist groups as well as dissatisfied elements of the military. [redacted]

Although Ershad has fared much better than we and other observers anticipated and the martial law regime has increased Bangladesh's stability, we believe his hold on political power could still be undermined, especially by dissatisfied elements from the military. Should Ershad be removed from power—due to a deteriorating economy, a political blunder, or escalating violence from the opposition, for instance—we believe his replacement would be another conservative general or, less likely, a military-backed civilian politician. We see the military as continuing to be the significant element in Bangladesh's future and constituting the major base of power for Ershad even if he goes through with his proposed transition to a civilian leader. He will, however, probably need to play down the military's role once he is elected in order to strengthen his own legitimacy as a civilian leader. [redacted]

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Appendix

Major Political Parties

Of the 50 or more groups that claim to be political parties in Bangladesh, we believe even the seven major ones will be unable to make a significant showing against Ershad in the elections.⁴ [redacted]

Awami League (Hasina)

The Awami League (Hasina) is the best organized political party and probably has the funds to campaign the hardest against Ershad. The League bases its support on its legacy as the party of Bengali independence and its leftist ideology, which attracts a number of students. Its well-known links to India, however, weaken its appeal. A split between moderates and pro-Soviet supporters may further weaken the party. The moderate faction would be unlikely to support an Ershad political alliance. [redacted]

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

Conservative and formed from various factions by President Zia, the BNP was the ruling party prior to the latest coup. The BNP is split into two factions—one favoring Ershad—each bidding for the support of Zia's widow. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] Her backing would be a major asset for Ershad. [redacted]

Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party—JSD)

The JSD, Bangladesh's major radical leftist party, is financially strapped, and, according to US Embassy reports, party members are at odds over whether to advocate more revolutionary measures or support a more moderate stance. [redacted]

[redacted] The JSD appears to have insufficient national strength to make any showing in an election, but it will continue to incite opposition to Ershad among students and possibly enlisted personnel in the military. [redacted]

⁴ Information on the numbers of members and followers is fragmentary and unreliable. [redacted]

Muslim League

The conservative Muslim League's strength stems from its dominance in the politics of East Bengal during the years of Pakistani rule from 1947 until its defeat by the Awami League in 1970. Although the League professes to call for an Islamic state, its policies appear to be more rhetorical than substantive; it is not fundamentalist. [redacted]

[redacted] The party's support would be more symbolic than real for Ershad because its influence lies in its history. [redacted]

Democratic League

This moderate, rightwing party was formed by former Bangladesh President Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed in 1976. In 1977 Mushtaque was jailed by a martial law court on corruption charges, but the party has achieved some significance since Mushtaque's release in March 1980. The party has failed to organize effectively below the national level, and its following is based primarily on loyalty to Mushtaque rather than party affiliation, according to a US Embassy report. [redacted]

[redacted]

Jamaat-e-Islami

At the extreme right of the political spectrum, the Jamaat was formed in 1941 in British India and sided with the Pakistanis during the 1971 civil war. The Jamaat calls for a democratic but strict Islamic state. According to Embassy reporting, membership in the Jamaat is small because of the rigid requirements [redacted]

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applicants must meet to demonstrate their commitment to Islam. Bangladesh derives an important part of its national identity from Islam. Religion plays a limited role in Bangladesh politics but could be used by dissatisfied groups to trigger political opposition.

[redacted]

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Communist Party of Bangladesh (Pro-Soviet)

The CPB, one of a half dozen or more Communist parties in Bangladesh, is of minor importance in Bangladesh politics or internationally. Before the martial law takeover, according to Embassy reporting, the student wing—Chatra Union—was active on the campus of Dhaka University and was involved in the campus violence in mid-February. Like the JSD, the CPB is factionalized and centered in cities.

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