

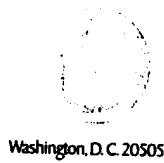
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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

6 November 1987

Bangladesh: Ershad's Prospects Improve for 10 November

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Summary

President Ershad's use of force and concessions will probably enable him to defeat opposition attempts to oust him on 10 November. The opposition hopes to foment sufficient violence in Dhaka during demonstrations on that date to provoke the military to intervene and overthrow Ershad. For now, however, his political foes and Army critics have failed to agree on the composition of a successor government, likely a fatal weakness in the opposition's strategy. Without an agreement between the military and the opposition on a new government, we do not expect the Army to act. Over the long term, Ershad's staying power hinges on his efforts to divide his military challengers and build a reliable political base by either coopting or splitting the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. [Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] Pakistan/Bangladesh Branch, South Asia Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 5 November was used in its preparation. Comments and queries should be directed to Chief, South Asia Division [Redacted]

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The Challenge to Ershad

Turbulence and violence have marked Bangladeshi politics since independence in 1971 and opposition plans to oust Ershad on 10 November are no exception. Bangladesh President Ershad's chief rivals, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), seek his removal and transfer of power to a civil-military coalition which they would dominate. They hope to bring at least 500,000 people to demonstrate in Dhaka on 10 November in an attempt to shut down all government institutions as a means to convince the Army that the President can not govern without their cooperation. [Redacted]

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junior officers would probably resent scraping of the bill, we believe the generals could hold them in line. [Redacted]

For now, Ershad retains Army support, the key element in Bangladeshi politics. [Redacted]

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Ershad has confronted their challenge with a mix of force and concessions which should enable him to prevail. In a preemptive crackdown directed at opposition political street organizers, the police arrested over 4,500 activists in early November, according to press reports. [Redacted]

[Redacted] the President is contemplating instituting emergency constitutional measures that will allow him to restrict assemblies. It also is possible that Ershad will close down the transport network before 10 November, making travel from the outlying parts of the country to Dhaka for the demonstration virtually impossible. We believe these preventive measures will be sufficient to disrupt his opponents and prevent them from achieving a turnout on 10 November great enough to shut down the government. [Redacted]

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For their part, the politicians rejected participation in a "facade" civilian government that they argue would be little better than Ershad's. [Redacted]

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Divided Opposition

Because the opposition-military talks broke down, we believe the Army is unlikely to move against Ershad. It is not cohesive and is held together by a system of shifting, informal alliances dominated by the personalities of senior generals. Unless several of the most powerful generals have already cut a deal with the opposition, we believe it unlikely that any one general will move against Ershad. Moreover, the generals undoubtedly fear that a coup could unleash the ambitions of more junior officers and soldiers, destroying discipline. The Army was wracked by a series of enlisted mutinies in 1975 and 1977 and their lessons almost certainly remain seared into the Army's psyche. [Redacted]

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Balancing his show of force, the President has offered to dissolve parliament, bring the BNP -- which boycotted the 1986 parliamentary election -- into parliament, and expand the Awami League's representation. [Redacted]

Ershad also has offered to scrap a bill expanding the military's role in local government that has provoked a storm of outrage from the opposition and led in July to violent street confrontations with Ershad's Jatiyo Party supporters. The bill has been sent back to parliament for reconsideration, but both opposition parties are demanding that it be permanently tabled. [Redacted]

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Although the two main opposition leaders met publicly in late October and agreed to oppose Ershad on 10 November, their political parties--the Awami League and the BNP--remain divided. They are torn by factionalism, internecine strife, personal vendettas, and ideological bickering. If any of the opposition parties gained power, the programs they would pursue would differ radically. Begum Zia, chief of the BNP and widow of slain President Ziaur Rahman, favors a presidential system. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the murdered first ruler of Bangladesh, favors a parliamentary style of government. The only issue that unites them is Ershad's removal. [Redacted]

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Ironically, the military leadership is reluctant to intervene in local government as called for in the controversial bill. [Redacted] the Army is split on the bill's contents, with the junior officers favoring the visibility the bill would give them, but united in displeasure over Ershad's crude handling of the furor it has sparked. Although some

Only the BNP enjoys any degree of Army support. The military has distrusted the pro-India Awami League's policies since it languished under Sheikh Mujib's post-independence rule in the early 1970's. For the Army, the memory of slain

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President Ziaur Rahman, and his pro-nationalist policies make the BNP more appealing. In any coalition, however, the Army would insist upon the upper hand. [Redacted]

[Redacted] He apparently is not concerned with BNP leader Zia Begum's hold on her party because he considers her to be primarily a figurehead whom party members retain out of deference to her late husband, President Ziaur Rahman. Moderate elements led by BNP Secretary General Obaidur Rahman, however, appear to be more favorably disposed to dealing with Ershad. We judge that Ershad hopes to coopt this section of the BNP and start building a political base with a pro-Army constituency. [Redacted]

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What is Likely to Happen on 10 November?

In our judgment, there is no likelihood that either Ershad or his opponents will back down before 10 November. Ershad will rely upon interdicting as many demonstrators as possible by cutting transportation links into Dhaka. He will invoke the criminal code that prohibits congregations of more than five people in a designated area. We judge he will use paramilitary troops as his first line of defense, gambling that they will be sufficient to maintain order. We believe that he will consider any recourse to the Army risky but will call it out if lesser methods fail. [Redacted]

If Ershad is Removed

The Military will only tolerate a limited amount of controlled lawlessness and will withdraw its lukewarm support for Ershad, we believe, if it views him unable to preserve basic law and order. If Ershad is removed, his most likely successor would be either Ninth Division Commander Major General Noor Uddin Khan or Army Chief of General Staff Abdul Wahed. Both are ambitious [Redacted] but neither appears willing to share real power with the politicians. Both generals are suspicious of one another and their would-be political partners. An interim government headed by Chief of Army Staff Major General Mohammad Atiqur Rahman also is a possibility while the key principals sorted out their respective positions. Any replacement government almost certainly would continue Ershad's pro-West policies. [Redacted]

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Opposition leaders have told US diplomats that they intend to assemble at "several strategic points," then march to government buildings such as the Secretariat which they will encircle to prevent normal activities. Both sides are anticipating violent confrontations, the US Embassy reported in early November. We believe that, although the opposition leadership insists that it wishes to avoid violence, violence is central to its strategy. It is the only method likely to demonstrate to the generals that the government cannot operate without military intervention. We do not believe, however, that the opposition has sufficient dedicated demonstrators to force the issue to the point of provoking a military coup. [Redacted]

After 10 November

Ershad's lack of political legitimacy and a credible political organization are his most serious long-term problems. His Jatiyo Party remains largely a paper organization that can be counted on to suppress street violence and little else. It has almost no popular following and has suffered from Ershad's neglect. Because the Army is jealous of its role as the key player in domestic affairs, Ershad is likely to try to strengthen his appeal in the Army. Higher salaries, better living quarters, and increased visibility, such as in the flood relief, will work to ameliorate discontent [Redacted]

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The President is likely to supplement these perquisites by appealing to the more moderate elements of the BNP [Redacted]

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CHRONOLOGY OF ERSHAD'S RULE

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|-------------|-------------|--|
| 1982 | 24 March | <i>Lieutenant General Ershad stages a bloodless coup against the BNP Government of Abdus Sattar.</i> |
| 1983 | December | <i>Lieutenant General Ershad declares himself President.</i> |
| 1985 | March | <i>National Referendum approving Ershad's leadership passes with a huge majority.</i> |
| 1986 | 7 May | <i>Parliamentary elections give Ershad's Jatiyo Party a nearly two-thirds majority; massive vote fraud occurs.</i> |
| | 31 August | <i>Ershad retires from the Army.</i> |
| | 15 October | <i>Ershad wins Presidential election granting a 5-year term; major opposition parties boycott the election.</i> |
| | 10 November | <i>Parliament passes an indemnification act legalizing all actions taken when martial law was in force; martial law is formally lifted, and the 1972 Constitution is restored.</i> |
| 1987 | July | <i>Assassination plot against Ershad by disgruntled Army enlisted personnel foiled.</i> |
| | 10 November | <i>Encirclement of Dhaka by civilian opposition.</i> |

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SUBJECT: Bangladesh: Ershad's Prospects Improve for 10 November

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