

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Only the military wants democracy

President Gen. H. M. Ershad is offering democracy to Bangladesh, but the opposition doesn't know how to receive it.

In early October, violent political clashes took place all over Bangladesh as the opposition parties continued to press their plan for a civil disobedience movement against the government and a total boycott of the parliamentary elections scheduled for Dec. 8.

The opposition's demand to abolish martial law and set up an "impartial" transitional government to hold the elections has irked President Ershad. He has reiterated that martial law would not be withdrawn until after the elections are held and the constitution is revived. "If the major parties do not come to the polls, then martial law will continue," General Ershad told the press.

The latest crisis erupted when the Awami League, the largest of Bangladesh political parties and leader of a 15-party opposition alliance against the military rule, asked the government to step down and called for a general strike on Sept. 27. The other seven-party opposition alliance, led by Khaleda Zia, president of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and widow of the assassinated President Ziaur Rahman, also endorsed the Awami League call.

The success of the Sept. 27 strike, and the violence associated with it, has put pressure on the military rulers. But concerning the demand for appointment of a non-partisan caretaker government to oversee the December elections, an exasperated General Ershad said: "Is there any example in

history of an impartial government? In the United States, has President Reagan resigned from his post?"

The opposition demand is ludicrous, and seems to be a roadblock deliberately set up to derail the elections. It also poses a major problem to the military rulers, who have been working to legitimize the role of the army in governmental affairs. Under General Ershad's tutelage a new party, Janadal, was launched in late May to fight the opposition political groups. Ershad told a large crowd in Dhaka at the time: "Janadal is my party and if my countrymen want, I will stand by them to give leadership."

President Ershad's move to form the Janadal was immediately successful. Many important political leaders, such as Korbani Ali of the Awami League (Hasina) and Yusuf Ali of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, left their parties to join the Janadal. Fifteen members of President Ershad's 24-man cabinet now belong to Janadal, and reports indicate that the remaining ministers soon will either join or leave the cabinet.

How much popularity the Janadal enjoys among the Bangladeshis is unclear. According to the opposition party leaders, Janadal is nothing more than an extension of the military and, therefore, has very little support among the masses. President Ershad, on the other hand, has claimed that Janadal will win at least 250 of 300 parliamentary seats in the election.

Whatever the extent of Janadal's

popularity, the party itself has clearly rattled the opposition. The opposition is heavily factionalized, and the various factions have only been kept together for the sake of the fight against military rule. Within the alliances, various factions representing the pro-Peking, pro-Moscow, pro-New Delhi, and pro-Washington parties co-exist with little or no political base. To many in these little factions, the Janadal is not an option to be rejected out of hand.

Even on the issue of boycotting the election, opposition leaders are split. While some opposition leaders argue that any election held under martial law would be impossible to win, other opposition leaders hold that a boycott will only give the military what they are looking for—an extended period of martial law. They also point out that there is no reason to boycott this election since the Awami League had contested the presidential election in 1978 and parliamentary elections in 1979, both of which were held under martial law.

In fact, what the opposition leaders have nervously suspected about President Ershad for a long while has now turned into a reality. The present military rulers have given close scrutiny to the Indonesian and Turkish models in order to fashion a major role for the army in the Bangladesh government. During his 31-month-old rule, Ershad has weeded out the hardliners from the army leadership, has released leading political figures, including opposition alliance leaders, and has lifted the ban on news agencies.

It is apparent that the opposition is unsure of the coming election results. But boycotting the elections will only further polarize their ranks and diminish their credibility. Under the circumstances, General Ershad has very little to lose.