

Ershad arrested in Bangladesh

The interim government will do well if it keeps the lynch-mob at bay. Susan B. Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra tell why the arrest may complicate things.

On Dec. 11, a week after he had relinquished his post as President, Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad, who ruled Bangladesh for nearly nine years, was put under house arrest along with his wife and six-year-old son. According to senior government officials, if General Ershad is put on trial on charges of treason, he will face the death penalty.

The interim government, which was appointed following President Ershad's resignation and is scheduled to oversee the next parliamentary elections Feb. 27, has also issued arrest warrants for 19 prominent individuals including former Vice President Moudud Ahmed, Prime Minister Kazi Jafar Ahmed, and Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmood. Two of Ershad's close associates, former Home Minister Mahmud Hassan and Deputy Prime Minister Shah Moazzam Hosain, have already been taken in.

The deposed President's arrest has come as a surprise, particularly since none of the top opposition leaders had voiced the demand when the movement to "oust Ershad" was launched on Oct. 10. Neither had the two top opposition leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, head of the Awami League-dominated 15-party alliance, and Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-dominated eight-party alliance, demanded General Ershad's arrest when the latter stepped down on Dec. 3.

Student power

According to available reports, the so-called countrywide demand for Ershad's arrest came mainly from the student community centered in Dhaka University, the hotbed in Bangladesh's politics. The arrest demand was made after the deposed President stated after his fall that he would return to active politics by contesting in the coming elections and that he has nothing to apologize for. Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, selected by the opposition leaders as President of the interim government, caved in to the students' pressure.

The feud between Ershad and the students goes back to the 1970s when the late President Ziaur Rahman appointed Ershad commander-in-chief of the Army. Bangladesh's student community has been the epicenter of all political movements throughout Bangladesh's brief history as well as during the days when it was East Pakistan. The student body

consists of radical leftists, moderate Marxists, socialists, liberal democrats, and a large number of musclemen, and it is virulently anti-military. While President, Ershad had tried to establish a foothold among these highly polarized student groups by introducing his followers into the campuses. The effort backfired, only aggravating the anti-Ershad mood and underlying anti-military sentiment.

In 1986, exasperated by the relentless opposition to his regime, President Ershad publicly criticized student politics and urged members of Parliament to consider banning political activities inside college campuses. Ershad cited concerns expressed by parents and an "overwhelmingly majority" of students about the lawlessness on the campuses and its adverse effect on overall education. Like the earlier effort, Ershad's attempt to depoliticize the college campuses was for naught. The move was beaten back by the opposition political parties, most of whom have active student wings, and by the students themselves. In the process, Ershad earned the permanent wrath of the politicized student community. The student groups played a key role and were instrumental, among other things, in bringing Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia together to join the movement to oust the President.

The built-in instability

The arrest of General Ershad indicates that the vendetta and revenge which have burdened Bangladesh's political system following the reign of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, Bangladesh's first President, will continue. On two prior occasions Army generals took over after allowing the civilian governments brief stints—Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman in 1975, and then General Ershad in 1982. The present political situation is as unstable and as confusing as it was in 1982.

The two top political leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia, are burdened with past resentments and have been at loggerheads for years. Sheikh Hasina Wazed had earlier accused Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman, husband of Begum Khaleda Zia, of being involved in the assassination of her father, first Bangladesh President Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Former President Begum Khaleda Zia, on the other hand, has expressed suspicion that Sheikh Hasina Wazed

was involved in working out a "political deal" with General Ershad, whom she has accused of masterminding her husband's assassination in 1981. The two women leaders have repeatedly publicized their mistrust of each other, and there is no doubt that their sharp personal differences will emerge in the coming election battle.

The arrest of General Ershad, and perhaps more important, the emergence of the student community as the final arbiter of government policy, will make the Army uneasy. Given the student community's strong anti-military reflex, if the interim government lets itself play into their hands, the denizens of Savar, a divisional headquarters adjoining Dhaka, will surely get restless. But unlike its counterpart in Pakistan, Bangladesh's Army is not a monolithic institution. It is heavily politicized and, therefore, fragmented. In the 1970s the army was teeming with Maoists and other varieties of Marxists. But with the execution of Lt. Colonel Taher in 1975 and the subsequent executions of "red-army" officers in 1977, under the direction of General Ershad, the power went back into the hands of "right-wing" Army officers, and the rank and file distributed their allegiance to the major political parties.

Army factor

It is widely known that in 1982, prior to the bloodless coup—also perhaps the most open coup—that brought General Ershad to power, he was meeting regularly with six Dhaka generals to work out the logistics of the coup. One of the six is Lt. Gen. Nuruddin Khan, now Chief of the Army Staff. As President, General Ershad kept in close touch with the Army, and, besides weeding out those who were not considered his supporters, was planning to increase the Army's strength to 1.5 million recruits. It has also been widely reported that, before stepping down on Dec. 3, Ershad had wide-ranging consultations with his generals. Some say it was their advice which led to his resignation, preventing a showdown with an aroused population.

Following Ershad's resignation, opposition leaders nominated Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the President of the interim government, but not without the approval of Lt. Gen. Nuruddin Khan. It is also telling that President Shahabuddin Ahmed sought the Army's help after his swearing-in to stabilize the situation. Whether Ershad's arrest is acceptable to the Army remains to be seen. Under the circumstances, however, any major effort "to weed out" the pro-Ershad Army officers would seem to be fraught with danger. Already two military intelligence officers, the head of the National Security Intelligence Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ashaf Hossain and the Commander of the Defense Forces Intelligence Brig. Nasiruddin Ahmed, have been relieved of their posts. Both officers were close advisers of General Ershad in recent days. A wholesale purge, coupled with the interim government's deference to the students, may bring the Army back into center-stage with a bang.

S. Korean diplomacy out on a limb for perestroika

by Lydia Cherry

The Asian country that has gone out on a limb the furthest based on the belief of the success of the U.S.S.R. becoming a "truly democratic and economically developed state"—as President Noh Tae Woo describes his vision—is unquestionably the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.). Just one week before Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on Dec. 20 announced his resignation because "there is a police state coming," President Noh Tae Woo stepped on Russian soil, the first time that a South Korean head of state had ever visited the Soviet Union.

In light of the chaos, collapsing economy, and growing police-state apparatus in the Soviet Union, President Noh's approach is to offer Mikhail Gorbachov what Noh sees as Moscow's best shot, an alliance with his country as part of the Asian-Pacific region, in exchange for Gorbachov's increased effort to "cool out" North Korea. With the U.S. increasingly pulling out of Korea, and Asia generally, South Korea perceives that without support from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, it will be impossible to contain the heavily militarized hermit kingdom of North Korea.

"Two-thirds of the world's population live in the Asian-Pacific region," President Noh explained in his introductory remarks upon his arrival in Moscow. "The western littoral of the Pacific—from Korea, Japan, and the countries of Southeast Asia to Australia—is now becoming a new center that is playing the main role in world prosperity. . . . The Soviet Union, which has immense potential, and Korea, which possesses tremendous vitality for development, will be able to become fellow travelers in the Asian-Pacific region and thereby open up a new page in history on the path toward the 21st century." Stepping back to acknowledge the current reality of the Soviet economic and political situation, Noh continued that he was "sure that, although the Soviet Union is experiencing great difficulties, only through perestroika and glasnost will the U.S.S.R. become a truly democratic and economically developed state," and pledged his country's support to Moscow's quest for this goal.