

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Dhaka is under siege

*An unholy opposition alliance brings violence and more chaos to impoverished Bangladesh.*

**T**he 15-day run-up to the Nov. 10 "Dhaka Siege" by the opposition saw a fresh wave of violence sweep the tiny, poor, and densely populated nation of Bangladesh.

At this writing, more than 50 people have been killed. A number of bomb bursts in the capital city of Dhaka and southern port city of Chittagong at government offices, American institutions, and Indian commercial centers indicates that not only the Ershad administration, but also countries which are not aligned ideologically to the opposition's viewpoints, have been targeted.

In response, the Ershad administration first tried to ignore, and then to confront the mob with law enforcement measures. The two major opposition leaders, Khalida Zia of the military-linked Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and Hasina Wazed of the mass-based Awami League were put under house arrest.

President Ershad also banned three political parties, the Bangladesh Communist Party, Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (National Socialist Party), and Bangladesh Swadhinata (Independence Party)—all belonging to the left.

The President himself has accused these parties of setting the American Cultural Center and Pan Am airlines office ablaze on Nov. 11.

Though President Ershad refused to admit the gravity of the situation, it is apparent that things remain fluid and dangerous. The projected visit of Pakistan's Prime Minister Mohammad Khad Junejo in the first week of November was called off.

World Bank President Barber Conable, who had come over to Calcutta for the hop to Dhaka, was advised not to come. Since the World Bank remains a major source of funds to foreign exchange-starved Bangladesh, this is significant.

The outburst was not, however, unexpected. "Down with military rule" is perhaps the only common ground for the highly fragmented opposition, which has, in any case, not produced an innovative program to alleviate the crushing poverty of the country.

At the same time, President Ershad has also not succeeded in establishing the Jatiyo Dal (National Party), launched before the spring 1986 elections, as a mass-based party and stable political center.

Since most of the opposition groups stayed away from the elections, Jatiyo Dal won handily, but it soon became clear that the party did not have the depth of support necessary to be a base from which the government could move forward.

The plan to launch the current demonstrations was declared in late June, right after the budget calling for increased revenue through fresh taxation was presented to Parliament.

The Bangladesh National Party-led seven-party alliance, and the five-party combine under the Awami League banner, both labeled the budget "anti-people," and vowed to resist "until the government withdraws it."

The other bone of contention was President Ershad's decision to amend the 1972 Nationalization Order through an ordinance providing for

gradual sale of 49% of the shares of the nationalized units to the public, and handing the remaining 51% over to the respective corporations.

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which coordinate aid flows to Bangladesh and thereby the country's economic policies, have been pushing for such reforms for a long time, and the opposition holds their pressure responsible for the government's move.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the situation is the unholy alliance of Muslim fundamentalists and the left with the Bangladesh National Party and Awami League. The Bangladeshi left is a strange animal that developed as an anti-India and anti-Soviet forum with heavy input from China from the outset.

In the name of opposing "Indian expansionism" and Soviet "social imperialism," many Marxist-Leninists did not hesitate to ally with fundamentalist elements like the Muslim League or Jamaat-e-Islami. After sitting out the 1971 liberation war, the left in 1979 joined the 17-party "National Front" formed by Aatur Rahman Khan, along with fundamentalist elements to fight Russia and India.

The Jamaat-e-Islami has been fighting its own form of radical nationalist fight in the so-called Islamic constitution movement under the leadership of an old guard, Maulana Abdur Rahim.

"There is no alternative to Islamic rule in a highly Islamic country like Bangladesh. The people do not support Ershad, Hasina, or Khalida. They like to see their motherland a real Islamic state," says Rahim.

Nonetheless, for the time being, both the left and Awami League are saying prayers together with the Maulana and his henchmen. It is not a prospect that bodes well for Bangladesh.