Bangladeshis bring down Ershad regime, 1987-1990

- (mainly or initiated by) people of color [1]
- an example of paradox of repression [2]
- an example of regime change [3]
- included participation by more than one social class [4]

Timing
23 June
1987
to:
5 December
1990

Location and Goals
Country:
Bangladesh
View Location on Map
Goals:
The immediate resignation of Hussain Muhammed Ershad and the establishment of a new neutral caretaker government to facilitate democratic elections.

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:
Methods in 3rd segment:
Methods in 4th segment:
Methods in 5th segment:
Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):
047. Assemblies of protest or support

Notes on Methods:
While the opposition did reportedly use nonviolent means to continue their protests against the regime in 1988 and 1989, I was unable to locate sources that detailed when they specifically occurred during that time period. Consequently, I left the methods fields for the 2nd to 5th segments blank - but this does not mean that the opposition was idle during this period, though their activities were severely limited by intense repression. I've put that the specific methods that I found that occurred sometime in 1988 or 1989 under the Additional methods (Timing Unknown) section.

Segment Length:
Approximately 7 months

Classifications
Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- Lawyers
- Opposition political party members
- University students
- doctors
- industrial workers
- teachers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Hasina Wajed of the Awami League, Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh National Party
Partners:
Workers-Employees United Council
External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- Awami League
- Bangladesh National Party
- Workers-Employees United Council

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Ershad regime, Bangladeshi police forces

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
While the opposition's leaders emphasized the use of nonviolence, there were some sporadic incidents of violence that occurred. During the 54-hour general strike on 23 July, some protesters threw stones at police while attacking the headquarters of Ershad's political party, Jatiyo, in Dhaka’s main business district.

Repressive Violence:
Throughout the entire campaign, Ershad used repressive action to try and shut down action against his regime. In November 1987 and November 1990, Ershad declared a state of emergency and relied on martial law to justify his actions in arresting top leaders of opposition groups, conducting mass arrests of protesters who continued to participate in strikes/demonstrations, having police fire on protesters, and making any anti-Ershad regime action punishable by the threat of imprisonment.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Total points:
10 out of 10 points

After becoming independent from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh had a long history of military rule. Its first two leaders, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman were both assassinated in military coups and their regimes were followed by military dictatorships. The two main Bangladeshi political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) were formed by these two leaders and later led by their daughter and widow respectively – Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia. In 1982, General Hussain Muhammed Ershad seized power in Bangladesh during a bloodless coup. Upon taking power, Ershad became the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA), suspended the 1972 constitution, and banned all political parties. However, in 1983, he assumed the presidency and by January 1986, he had restored full political activity in which his own party, the Jatiya (People’s) Party took a prominent part.

While Ershad was proclaimed the winner in a presidential election held in October 1986 under martial law, Bangladesh’s opposition parties challenged the legitimacy of Ershad’s regime. Opposition parties like the AL had participated in the 1986 parliamentary elections and believed they had won, but the vote count was
suspended for several days before eventually giving Ershad’s Jatiya Party a majority in Parliament. Despite the refusal of opposition parties to recognize the legitimacy of the Ershad regime, Ershad refused to step down. Starting in 1987, opposition groups organized mass demonstrations to demand Ershad’s removal from the presidency.

Opposition groups became mobilized after Ershad’s introduction of the controversial District Council Bill in parliament that would allow military officers to serve on local district councils. Consequently, in June 1987, opposition parties formed an alliance to implement a half-day general strike in Dhaka on 23 June 1987. Opposition parties organized and executed another half-day general strike in Dhaka the following week on 30 June that paralyzed most of Bangladesh’s major cities and towns. However, despite these efforts, Ershad’s Jatiyo Party majority in Parliament went on to pass the District Council Bill on 12 July 1987. In response, opposition groups struck and publically demonstrated two days after the bill’s passage, causing Ershad to send the bill back to Parliament to be reconsidered. Opposition groups intensified street demonstrations and became more closely unified, deciding to work together to call for Ershad’s immediate resignation and new elections under a caretaker government.

On 23 July 1987, opposition groups planned mass public demonstrations in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna. Following Ershad’s orders, police fired on participating protesters, resulting in civilian casualties, and police arrested as many as 500 protesters across the country. On the morning of 24 July, mourners of protesters who had died marched through the streets of Dhaka to the Baitul Mukurram Mosque. While mourning marches in Bangladesh are usually held in silence, many in the procession shouted, “Down with President Ershad!” and “The killers shall be punished!” On the same day, the Workers-Employees United Council began a 54-hour general strike in Dhaka calling for Ershad’s resignation – the longest general strike in Bangladesh’s history. Thousands participated, and while the leadership had emphasized the nonviolent nature of the strike, the action was marred by violence as clashes occurred between protesters and police when police fired on stone-throwing mobs that attacked the headquarters of Jatiyo in Dhaka’s central business district. Police also fired rounds of tear gas shells to disperse crowds of protesters.

By the fall of 1987, opposition groups had continued to coordinate efforts to put more pressure on the Ershad regime. On 28 October, Hasina and Khaleda Zia met – signaling a new phase of cooperation between the two leading opposition parties, the AL and BNP. Opposition groups planned a series of events that would begin 10 November, naming the action the “Siege of Dhaka”. Groups planned to bring thousands of their supporters to the streets to paralyze the capital city and heighten confrontation against Ershad. However, Ershad took action to defuse the situation and forestall the opposition’s plan to start a 72-hour strike on 29 November by declaring a state of emergency on 27 November 1987.

Under the state of emergency, Ershad arrested Hasina, Khaleda Zia, and other main opposition leaders while sending thousands of police forces into Bangladesh’s main urban areas to clamp down on protesters. In Dhaka, Ershad imposed a 30-hour curfew at midnight on 27 November and sent helmeted riot police and paramilitary forces to surround the capital. Additionally, Ershad ordered the suspension of all fundamental rights of Bangladeshi citizens, barred courts from trying any cases related to the violation of citizens’ rights, banned publication of any news or commentary against the government. Anyone who violated the orders under the state of emergency could be jailed up to three years and fined. Ershad publicly rejected the opposition’s call for his resignation, stating his intention to serve the remaining years of the term he won in the 1986 elections. At this point, while civil disobedience had rattled the Ershad regime, it had not been enough to bring the regime down. While what remained of the opposition attempted to regroup and tried to organize in 1988 and 1989, they faced continuous, intense repression by the Ershad regime and were plagued by internal divisions.

However, the events of the fall of 1990 marked a turning point for the opposition. Opposition groups had
reorganized and were closely unified in their efforts to achieve the common goal of bringing the Ershad regime down. Additionally, opposition groups now consisted of diverse segments of the Bangladeshi population including not only workers, but also doctors, lawyers, and intellectuals. Opposition groups organized a small number of public demonstrations on 10 October 1990.

In response, on 17 October the government closed universities and main schools but this only served to galvanize university students as one of the driving force of protest against the regime and the students put pressure on the traditionally divided opposition parties to continue maintaining a united front against Ershad.

After weeks of strikes and public demonstrations that paralyzed Dhaka and other major urban areas of Bangladesh, Ershad declared another state of emergency on 28 November 1990. Ershad suspended consideration of all civil rights and imposed an indefinite curfew on Dhaka. On 30 November, police officers fired on protesters who continued to participate in public demonstrations in Dhaka.

However, strikes and public demonstrations continued despite the imposition of martial law under the state of emergency.

On 3 December 1990, President Ershad publically stated his willingness to make concessions with the opposition as he was rapidly losing control of Dhaka and other major cities in Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s educated classes had began to play a key role in the anti-Ershad movement as teachers, journalists, and doctors went on strike – further paralyzing activity in Bangladesh.

On 4 December the opposition rejected Ershad’s proposal. 100,000 people marched in the streets of Dhaka to demand the President’s immediate resignation.

In a sign of Ershad’s weakening base of support, the Bangladeshi police began to refuse to comply with Ershad’s order to fire on demonstrators.

Ershad agreed to step down on 4 December.

After Ershad was removed from power, a three-month neutral transitional government headed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Shahabuddin Ahmed, declared a state of emergency, restored civil liberties, and was responsible for organizing elections on 27 February 1991.

The ensuing 1991 election was the first democratic election ever held in the country, and while 73 parties participated, the AL and BNP dominated – marking the beginning of a persistent two-party system in Bangladesh. The elections ultimately resulted in a BNP government, and Khaleda Zia was sworn in as Bangladesh’s prime minister.

However, since elections were held in 1991, political contests between the AL and BNP have been mainly fueled by personal rivalry between the parties’ leaders instead of being issue-oriented. Bangladesh’s winner-take-all politics have now produced a recurring pattern where the ruling party refuses a meaningful role for the opposition, the opposition walks out, and society is paralyzed by strikes and boycotts. To date, Bangladesh’s electoral system has been unable to resolve the tensions produced by this constant rivalry.

**Research Notes**

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Rosanna Kim, 18/11/2012

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