

THE COUP THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

The army, not the politicians, now runs Bangladesh

Between the barracks and the mosque

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WHEN Iajuddin Ahmed, Bangladesh's president, declared an army-backed state of emergency on January 11th and cancelled the election due on January 22nd, neither he nor the foreign governments quietly cheering him on used the word "coup". Yet that is what it looks like. The army, in the tradition of "guardian coups" from Fiji to Thailand, has stepped in with the usual list of apparently noble goals. The interim government it is backing will enable credible elections, clean up the country's extremely politicised civil service, fight corruption, fix the country's power crisis and keep food prices in check-and then return to the barracks.

The president stood down as head of the caretaker government that had been supposed to oversee the elections. He was replaced by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former central-bank governor and World Bank official. The technocratic administration he heads has so far sent the right signals. A drive against corruption-in which Bangladesh regularly nears the top of world league tables-is under way. The national-security chief, the top civil servant in the power ministry and the attorney-general have all been ousted. A start has been made in separating the judiciary from the executive.

But restoring democracy remains a tall order. The political system has collapsed. The army insisted the president step in before the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which headed a coalition government for the past five years, could rig the election and secure itself another term.

Delaying the vote averted a possible bloodbath. Allegations of election-rigging levelled by an alliance led by the other big party, the Awami League, had led to weeks of often violent protests and strikes. Their charges were, in effect, backed by foreign observers. Both the European Union and the UN withdrew their support for the election. The UN also warned the army against partisan intervention in politics, adding that this might jeopardise its lucrative role in UN peacekeeping operations. This threat helped sever an alliance between the army and the BNP.

The BNP's leader, the previous prime minister, Khaleda Zia, is

reported to have been taken aback by the state of emergency and disappointed in the generals. But the BNP is unlikely to go quietly, raising fears that the administration might be forced to make fuller use of its wide-ranging emergency powers, which it has so far used with restraint.

Unless something extraordinary happens to make the parties behave, there will be no return soon to two-party politics. It will take time to fix a voter list bloated with millions of extra names, to issue voter-identity cards, to set up a new independent election commission, and to purge the bureaucracy. It seems unachievable before the July monsoon, which pushes polls back to the final quarter of 2007. Indeed, what would be the fourth electoral battle between Mrs Zia and the League's Sheikh Hasina Wajed may never happen.

Arguing in favour of the state of emergency, Bangladesh's largest-selling newspaper, Prothom Alo, has exposed the practice of parties' auctioning off parliamentary seats for money. Matiur Rahman, the editor, also alleges that both big parties entered a bidding war to lure the Jatiya Party of the former dictator, Hossain Mohammad Ershad, into their alliance. Jatiya has asked the army to shut the paper down.

Although the state of emergency has supporters even among some liberal democrats, it is a high-stakes gamble. Authoritarian rule is unlikely to appeal for long, however fed up voters are with the two big parties and their mutually-loathing leaders. The main beneficiary from the failure of mainstream politics is an extremist Islamist fringe.

Internationally, the stakes are highest for neighbouring India. It accuses Bangladesh of harbouring insurgent groups from its north-east, and is home, claim politicians, to some 20m Bangladeshi migrants. By 2050 Bangladesh, only twice as big as Ireland, will have about 250m people. In the short term the only voting on offer to Bangladesh's people, half of whom live in abject poverty, is with their feet.

P.S.

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