

200 die in riots after Bangladesh coup

Continued from page 1

tenth Cabinet member was not immediately available.

Six Ministers of State were sworn in yesterday evening. They are: Mr Taheruddin Thakur, Mr Farid Gazi, Professor Nurul Islam Choudhury, Mr Nurul Islam Manzoor, Mr K. M. Obaidur Rahman and Mr Shah Moazzem Hossain. All except Shah Moazzem Hossain were also in the presidential Cabinet of Sheikh Mujib as either Ministers or Ministers of State.

Prominent among members of that Cabinet who have not been included in the Government formed yesterday are: Dr Kamal Hossain (the Foreign Minister, now abroad), Mr Abdus Samad, and Mr A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman. There has also been no definite word on the fate of the former Vice-President, Nazrui Islam.

All telecommunications with Dacca have been cut, and Dacca airport is closed. It is not clear whether the borders with India and Burma have been sealed.

The new regime announced in one of its first broadcasts that Bangladesh would be restyled, the "Islamic Republic of Bangladesh," a change which indicates the right-wing inclinations of the new rulers. It has even been speculated that they may want close relations with Pakistan.

The motivation of the coup leaders, while the details are unclear, is fairly obvious: Sheikh Mujib's most recent political manoeuvres have gradually built up a wide range of middle-class and army hostility. The only surprise is that his renowned political skill did not enable him to read and then neutralise these hostilities.

The miserable irony of Mujibur Rahman's death — his own countrymen responsible

for the act from which even the Pakistanis shrank — is a measure of how swift has been Bangladesh's descent from the heights of hope to the disillusion, despair, and class hostility that led to the coup.

Bangabandhu ("Father of the nation") himself had much to answer for. His laziness, his egotism, his shallow cleverness as an old-time faction politician — all belied that wise, responsible, compassionate face with its shaggy, paternal moustache. Mujib, as Prime Minister of a parliamentary democracy of sorts, totally failed to deliver reform or even competence and honest administration.

But it seems to have been his final manoeuvres to rescue his own position and bring about some sort of progress in Bangladesh on an authoritarian and Left-wing model that brought about his downfall, by alienating that middle class, including the army, upon which his power originally rested.

By the summer of last year, Mujib knew well enough how bankrupt he and the Awami League had become. Living standards, already abysmal, had fallen further still. Political murders by underground guerrilla groups were running at, on average, seven a day. There was massive corruption for which Mujib and his family were blamed.

In spite of £12,000 millions of foreign aid since independence in December, 1971, the economy was still the same pathetic mixture of largely nationalised, inefficient, and corrupt industry, and an agriculture crippled by the cynical dealings of merchants and food speculators — many of them prominent members of the Awami League. Mujib began casting around for a new start, not without some prompting,

many believe, from the Communist Party of Bangladesh and other pro-Moscow groups.

The "new start" turned out to involve the abandonment of parliamentary democracy, feeble though it was. In its place, Mujib envisaged a one-party State, with that party a disciplined "cadre" party, an instrument both of personal power and social reform. In December last year he declared a state of emergency. In January, he brought in what was effectively a new Constitution. This vested all executive powers, including control of the judiciary, in himself as President, and banned all political parties except a single national party.

It was typical of Sheikh Mujib's relaxed politics that after that nothing much happened for several months. His ruling style was relaxed to the point of sloth. He sat in his office like the mediaeval ruler he psychologically was, laughing and joking with friends and colleagues, telling anecdotes, giving lectures, and dealing with the daily queue of supplicants. His new Council of Ministers was the old Cabinet plus a few technocrats. Arrests — at least of prominent people — were few.

In May, the reform programme was announced and, short though it was, it was apparently detailed enough to horrify many in the Awami League, the army, and the professional and middle classes generally. The programme called for the setting up of compulsory cooperatives in the countryside, for administrative changes in rural areas that would downgrade the local middle classes, and for the expansion of the single-national party, the Bangladesh Kisan Shramik Awami League, to incorporate five fronts, one

each for peasants, workers, students, youth and women.

The picture was getting clearer: Mujib wanted to move away from his traditional supporters — professionals, businessmen, civil servants, and the middle class — towards the peasantry, at least the richer peasants. And he was trying to change the League from a collection of privileged power and money brokers into a cadre party, obeying orders implicitly. He was hitting, too, at the civil service, with the idea of administrative councils dominated by popular representatives.

The earlier ban on opposition parties had cut off one avenue of what was largely middle-class dissent. The transformation of the press into an entirely Government-controlled system — which took place in June — cut off another. And the Awami League leadership — each Minister with his faction in the party — must have been uncomfortably aware that their days were probably numbered.

The top Awami League leaders knew Mujib and they knew how he operated, going from one vague alliance to the next in order to fragment opposition within the party and then destroy it piecemeal. As early as February, the League leadership felt that the new Cabinet, so similar to the old, was only an "arrangement" until Mujib was ready for a major party purge.

These Ministers included the man who has just taken over as President, Khondakar Mush-taque Ahmed; the Commerce Minister, who had been Foreign Minister of the Bengali government-in-exile in Calcutta during 1971. Khondakar is known to be right-wing. And he may well have taken a lesson from the fate of his most prominent colleague from the Calcutta

days, Tajuddin Ahmed, once Prime Minister, who was ousted from the Cabinet last year.

There were also old fashioned ideological considerations, for Mujib brought into the central committee of the new party a number of pro-Moscow politicians, and this may have deeply upset the old-fashioned Moslems both in the League and outside it. It is significant that the new rulers of Bangladesh have retitled the country an "Islamic Republic."

And, finally, Mujib was hitting at the army, and had been doing so, in fact, since independence. The regular army of Bangladesh was from the beginning rivalled by a large and well-equipped para-military force that came to be known as the Rakhi Bahini, an offshoot of the Mukti Bahini who fought the Pakistanis in 1971 after training by the Indians. It was a presidential guard, a secret police, and an alternative army wrapped into one. Comparisons have included the Black and Tans in Ireland and the Brown-shirts in Germany.

Until 1973 the Rakhi Bahini had Indian advisers, and even after that its officers went to Dehra Dun in India for training. The Rakhi Bahini grew to a strength of 20,000 and the ultimate target was a much higher figure. Clad in green, the Rakhi Bahini was given the dirtiest jobs — strike-breaking, chasing out slum dwellers from Dacca, searching for rice hoards in the countryside, fighting the underground guerrillas. Methods were often brutal and treatment of supposed subversives included torture and sometimes summary execution.

What enraged the regular army was not only the numerical strength of the Rakhi Bahini but the way it was

favoured and coddled by the regime. Large sums were spent on special barracks and, at a time when the army had to be content with a motley collection of obsolete weapons, the Rakhi Bahini, organised as an infantry force, was getting the lion's share of new equipment. Negotiations were going on, for instance, to equip it with modern automatic rifles, while the army still had ancient .303s.

The rôle of the Rakhi Bahini in the coup is not clear. If it supported the army — as it may have done — it will be because many of its senior officers, mostly ex-army themselves, agreed ultimately with the army that there should be only one military force in the country. In any case, army resentment of the Rakhi Bahini must have been a major factor in the coup, and Sheikh Mujib's policy of trying to balance one army with another was a clear failure.

One element here was the Sheikh's dependence on India, whose child the Rakhi Bahini very much was. India's reaction to the coup is yet to be fully gauged, but the coup leaders must have rated the chances of intervention low. Now a great deal depends on the attitude they take to New Delhi, which, many believe, would not hesitate to move in if Dacca became overtly and violently anti-Indian.

But an army administration of Bangladesh — Pakistani style — is unlikely. The Bangladesh army, navy, and air force strength is only about 58,000 men and the officer corps stands at a mere 1,100 — hardly a cadre to run a country of 75 million people. As one Western attaché said, commenting on coup prospects earlier this year: "The army can hardly run itself."