

TIME

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BANGLADESH: Coups and Chaos

From the moment of its independence, Bangladesh has lived on the edge of anarchy. Thousands of leftist Mukti Bahini guerrillas who had fought for independence from Pakistan retained their arms after the fighting ended. The 35,000-man army simmered with discontent, and rivalries between volatile factions were held in check mainly by the prestige of Sheik Mujibur Rahman, whom Bengalis revered as Bangabandhu (friend of Bengal). But last August Mujib and his family were massacred by the "seven majors," a group of young officers who staged a brutal lightning coup against Mujib's increasingly corrupt and autocratic regime. Lacking broad popular support, the young officers ever since have faced twin dangers: revenge by Mujib's outraged supporters or a reassertion of authority by the older generals they elbowed aside during the coup.

Last week in a dizzying sequence of events, the seven majors and the civil administration they had set up were ousted. The generals then installed their own President—Abu Sadat Mohamed Sayem, chief justice of the Bangladesh Supreme Court. At week's end Bangladesh appeared threatened with civil war. Reports reached New Delhi of clashes involving thousands of armed students in Dacca and fighting between rival military units across the nation.

The week of coup and counter coup apparently began with murder. Late Sunday night a number of prominent political prisoners, including two former Prime Ministers and other followers of Sheik Mujib, were murdered in Dacca jail. As news of the massacre spread through the city, crowds blamed the crime on the ruling majors.

The jail murders and the emotional Bengalis' reaction to the news apparently convinced the generals that it was time to oust the upstarts. Early Monday morning, soldiers loyal to the generals took up positions outside the presidential palace. As helicopters and MIGs made mock strafing runs over the palace, the majors negotiated a deal: surrender of power in exchange for safe-conduct passage for themselves and their families to Thailand. Among those who promptly applied for political asylum in the U.S. and Pakistan was Lieut. Colonel Sayed Farook Rahman, instigator of the August coup.

The deal was approved by Bangladesh's civilian President Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed, who turned out to be the week's next political victim. As students and followers of Mujib rioted in Dacca to protest the escape of the majors, Khondakar resigned and was replaced by Sayem. Real power, however, seemed to lie with a ten-man military council. The council's heads included Major General Khalid Musharraf, who almost immediately arrested and displaced his boss, Lieut. General Zia-Ur Rahman, as army chief of staff.

The reshuffling had barely begun. Soon after being sworn in as President, Sayem addressed the nation, promising a return to parliamentary rule by February 1977. A few hours later, Radio Bangladesh crackled with news that General Zia had returned to power, as chief of staff of the Bangladesh army but retaining the newly appointed Sayem as President. By this time, nobody knew which of the recent actors in this bloody drama were dead and which were alive. Khondakar was alive, because he broadcast an appeal for support for his successor. But the short-lived Chief of Staff Khalid was reported killed only a few hours after he had come to power. All over Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest, most overcrowded and most mismanaged nations, there were fearful signs of rising disorder.

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