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BANGLADESH: The Second Revolution

"All we want is our daily rice and lentils," said a Dacca shopkeeper. "If we get enough at a price we can afford, we don't care what system is used to govern us." That was a widely shared feeling throughout Bangladesh last week as Sheik Mujibur Rahman, who led the country to independence from Pakistan in 1971, assumed sweeping presidential powers. Under a new constitutional amendment the parliamentary system was abolished and Bangladesh embarked on what Mujib grandly described as "a second revolution."

It was less a revolution than a desperate effort by Mujib to end the corruption, bureaucratic malfeasance and political violence that plague his country. A parliamentary committee began drafting the amendment last July. Late last month, after the amendment had been debated exhaustively—and secretly—in committee, Mujib decided to put the changes into effect. An obedient Parliament—305 of whose 312 members belong to Mujib's Awami League party—swiftly and unanimously approved the switch to presidential rule.

Under the new system, executive powers are vested in the President, who will be elected directly every five years, and in a Council of Ministers appointed by him. Although an elected Parliament can pass legislation, the President has veto power and can dissolve Parliament indefinitely. Parliament may remove the President, however, by a three-fourths vote "for violating the constitution or grave misconduct" as well as for physical or mental Incapacity. The amendment also empowers Mujib to set up a single "national party," thus shutting off any political opposition.

In seeking greater power, Mujib was plainly concerned that foreign aid, on which Bangladesh is heavily dependent, would be sharply cut if what he described as the "chaotic situation" continued to prevail. "How long will friends continue to give us food and assistance?" he asked in an emotional address explaining the change. "We must have population control. We must discipline ourselves. I do not want to lead a nation of beggars."

For the time being, Mujib has retained his entire Cabinet. Most observers believe that he did so primarily for the sake of continuity and that major changes will come later. His toughest action is expected to be aimed at profiteers and hoarders, who have interfered with the flow of relief supplies from abroad. An estimated 30,000 people died of starvation after floods destroyed much of last year's rice and jute crops. The death toll could go much higher if this year's crops should also be ruined. Inflation is virtually out of

control; rice has more than doubled in price in the past year (from 200 per lb. to 500). Law-and-order is also a serious problem. Since independence, there have been at least 6,000 political murders.

Obviously, with so much power vested in a single man, the country could drift into dictatorship. Mujib pledged last week that he would preserve democratic rights, and not many can imagine him in the role of a tyrannical despot. Still, more than a few people in Bangladesh may well feel that a small dose of authoritarianism would be preferable to the complete collapse of their young country.

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