

TIME

Monday, Jun. 15, 1981

Bangladesh: Power Vacuum

Facing a future without Zia

Life in all parts of beloved Bangladesh has returned to normal," Dacca's state radio announced triumphantly last week. For 48 hours Bangladesh had teetered toward civil war, following a coup attempt in the southeastern port of Chittagong in which President Ziaur Rahman, 45, was gunned down by an assault force of mutinous troops. Major General Abul Manzur, 40, who led the putsch against his longtime rival, had hoped for help from the military across the country. Instead, army units stormed the rebellious military garrison in Chittagong. While trying to flee to Burma, Manzur was captured and summarily shot by "angry soldiers," as Dacca radio explained. Government troops discovered Zia's body in a shallow grave 22 miles from the official guesthouse where he had been assassinated. During a state funeral in Dacca last Tuesday, a million Bangladeshi jostled and shoved to catch a glimpse of the cortege bearing Zia's simple wooden coffin.

The assassination of the popular leader, who had retired from the military in 1977 in order to take office as President and lead Bangladesh back to civilian rule, left a power vacuum in the poverty-stricken country that acting President Abdus Sattar, 75, a mild-mannered moderate, was not likely to fill for long.

The nation's constitution calls for elections within six months, but with Zia's majority Bangladesh Nationalist Party now bereft of a strong leader and the 29 opposition parties fragmented and fractious, the fate of civilian rule seemed to depend on who flexes the biggest muscles. For the moment at least, the military's guns were supporting the government.

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