1982–90: Political Manoeuvres and Ethnic Violence

This chapter examines the impact of selected domestic events on Indo–Bangladesh relations during Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s regime, as part of the overall evaluation of the domestic and external determinants of Bangladesh’s foreign relations. Aspects of three issues have been selected as appropriate examples for analysis: Ershad’s assumption of power; the Farakka Barrage dispute; and the hill-people insurgency occurring in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeast Bangladesh. The chapter does not aim to explore these issues comprehensively. The intention is to use specific examples to illustrate the way in which each issue has been shaped, in part, by Bangladesh’s domestic arena.

As with Ziaur Rahman, Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s successful bid for leadership of Bangladesh influenced the course of Indo–Bangladesh relations, although to a more limited extent. Both leaders commenced their regimes via a military coup, but with differing reactions from India, further countering the common argument that relations were soured because of the shift to military rule in Bangladesh.

For those attempting to achieve supremacy in the wake of Zia’s assassination in May 1981, political life remained volatile and precarious, although certain conditions offered advantages for an ambitious and shrewd individual such as Ershad. Ziaur Rahman’s instinctive and vulnerable bid for leadership was made in highly dangerous circumstances, and in the face of Indian disapproval and indignation. Ershad, by contrast, had ample time to choose an opportune moment to take over the reins of government, an advantage which also minimised the risk of provoking Indian antagonism and interference. Ershad’s initial decision to support the establishment of a civilian government following Zia’s assassination aroused speculation in the Indian media that his ‘mysterious’ failure to seize power at that time was intended to ‘cover up something’.1

Ershad was clearly regarded with some degree of suspicion in India, but his choice, or opportunity, to ‘postpone’ the expected coup proved to be an astute move which offered much greater scope for political gain, and in
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turn, smoothed Bangladesh’s relations with India. There was a variety of domestic reasons why Ershad’s eventual ousting of Bangladesh’s civilian regime in 1982 occurred with little domestic opposition and hence ameliorated India’s response.

Historical precedent had shown that the most dangerous threat facing a leader of Bangladesh usually came from within the military. Zia’s unceasing efforts to eradicate powerful military opposition, exemplified by the thwarting of at least 20 attempts to overthrow his regime, did not prevent his assassination from within the military. Nevertheless, by means of execution and imprisonment, Zia had thinned and weakened the ranks of the most troublesome military factions, leaving the group which he had come to favour the most, the repatriates, in by far the most powerful position. Being a member of the repatriate group, Ershad was able to reap the benefit of Zia’s efforts to curb military opposition, bringing to heel with little difficulty those who had played a role in Zia’s demise. Consequently, Ershad was under little pressure to stage a coup and enforce martial law at that particular time.

Ershad also had to take into account the prevalent, heightened public fear of the military and its violent and politically obtrusive factionalism which had culminated in Zia’s assassination. In being able to delay a bid for direct leadership, Ershad was able to concentrate on the task of consolidating his position as leader of the armed forces and, at the same time, minimise civilian apprehension. Ershad’s attempt to deal with both of those problems was encapsulated in his open commitment to ensure that the military be given a decision-making, stabilising role in Bangladeshi political life, governed by constitutional means and theoretically subject to popular approval.

In being able to choose the timing of his coup, Ershad had more scope to play upon political divisions which were bound to surface in the wake of a government which had been moulded around Zia’s specific goals and ambitions. It was far more pragmatic for Ershad to allow Acting President Abdus Sattar’s civilian government to bear the burden of trying to follow in Zia’s idolised, martyred footsteps, and to let Sattar run the risk of losing popularity if unsuccessful. Sattar’s failure was a probability. The ensuing necessity to restore political and economic stability would then have been used to justify a declaration of martial law, the earlier prospect of which had been viewed widely with alarm.

This type of strategy was used effectively by Ershad. In a style reminiscent of that pursued by former Pakistan President, Muhammad Ayub Khan in 1958, Ershad opted finally to impose martial law on the grounds that the civil administration was no longer able to function effectively and ‘wanton corruption at all levels had become permissible as part of life, causing unbearable sufferings to the people’. Sattar’s regime and the opposition parties had both been plagued by intra-party squabbling and political disarray, and consequently had failed to galvanise popular confidence and support. The picture