CHAPTER THREE

POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND INTERNAL CLEAVAGES OF THE BANGLADESH MILITARY

The Bangladesh armed forces in spite of their small size and homogeneous ethnic origin, could not emerge as a cohesive and disciplined force in the post-independence period. Right from the beginning, Bangladesh armed forces had been plagued by factionalism, serious ideological schisms and intense personal rivalries. The origin of the internal cleavages in the Bangladesh armed forces could be traced to the liberation struggle. The Bangladesh military fighting for the liberation of the country was divided on various ideological and personal grounds.

Bangladesh Armed Forces During the Liberation War

Differences had existed within the Bangladesh Army over the issue of military strategy to be adopted for the Liberation War. Both the army high command and the Bangladesh Government-in-exile initially tried to follow conventional military tactics and formations. However, the Bengali armed personnel suffered heavy casualties when they decided to confront the Pakistanis in an open conventional warfare. The liberation forces were defeated by the Pakistanis in many battles due to latter's training, experience and superior fire power. ¹

All these factors necessitated a change in the operational strategy. In order to ensure more effective resistance to the occupation army and to mobilise political support for it, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Colonel (retd.) M.A.G. Osmani, the Commander-in-Chief of the liberation forces and other army officers met in a conference from July 11-17, 1971 at Teliapara in Sylhet district. The military strategy prepared at this conference is popularly known as Teliapara Strategy.

Teliapara Strategy involved three important fighting tactics. In the first place, the military officers decided to rely on guerrilla methods like 'hit and run' operations, elimination of collaborators, destroying enemy's communication links and so on. Secondly, the army commanders agreed that the regular forces would be dispersed to different sectors to give cover to guerrilla operations. Finally, it was decided that with the completion of guerrilla operations, a full scale military offensive would be undertaken with the help of best materials available among the regular units and guerrilla forces.2

In order to implement the Teliapara Strategy, Bangladesh was divided into 11 operational sectors. The regular members of the erstwhile East Bengal Regiment and East Pakistan Rifles were reorganised into three brigades - Z Force, K Force and S Force commanded by Majors Ziaur Rahman, Khaled Mosharraf and K.M. Safiullah respectively.

The Bangladesh Government-in-exile decided to raise the strength of the liberation forces. After July 1971, an extensive programme of recruitment of freedom fighters was undertaken. The political leadership tried to ensure that only those freedom fighters who were ideologically loyal to the Awami League, were recruited. Youngmen affiliated to other political parties, particularly the radical groups were prevented from infiltrating into the armed forces.3

The sector commanders took the responsibility for training and equipping the freedom fighters and organising military operations. For the supply of arms and ammunition, they relied on India.

However, another military strategy was put forward by sector commanders like Colonel Abu Taher and Lt. Colonel M.Ziauddin. They argued that instead of forming regular battalions, all the experienced armed forces personnel should be dispersed in different parts of the country to raise and train a 'people's militia' drawn from the

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peasantry. For logistics, emphasis was laid on capturing enemy equipments, rather than relying on foreign assistance.

They also insisted that the military headquarter and the sector headquarters should be shifted inside the Bangladesh territory. It was argued that the occupation forces could only be defeated through a form of people's war based on mass mobilisation and overwhelming support of the Bengali population. 4

This military strategy could not be worked out finally because of the opposition from a section of the Bangladesh military command. Colonel Taher was opposed by Osmani and Majors Safullah and Khaled Mosharraf when he recommended this strategy in a sector commanders' conference held at Calcutta in October 1971. The only two army officers who supported Colonel Taher were Major Ziaur Rahman and Lt. Colonel Ziauddin. 5

A Bangladeshi political analyst is of the opinion that the basic difference between the two groups was their perception of what constituted 'national liberation'. The political objective of Osmani and some of his military colleagues was to put the Awami League into power in an independent Bangladesh in the shortest possible time and with all available means. Colonel Taher's group, on the other hand, devised a strategy which was not only aimed at the attainment of independence but also the socio-economic transformation of Bangladesh in the process of the struggle. 6

The Military Debate: People's Army Versus Conventional Army

The difference which had previously existed over the questions of war strategy for the Liberation War took a new form in the post-independence period. The freedom fighters held two incompatible views with regard to the future institutional framework of

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4 In his testimony, Colonel Taher has elaborately discussed the military strategy he wanted to be implemented by the Bangladesh military command of the Liberation War in 1971. See Colonel Taher's testimony given in Lawrence Lifschultz, Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution (London: Zed Press, 1979), pp. 79-88.


the Bangladesh armed forces. One group opted for continuing the traditional concepts and practices of a conventional military similar to the pattern followed in the Western liberal democracies while the other group demanded a complete restructuring of the Bangladesh Army. The later group proposed that the army should be converted into a kind of 'productive army' on the model of Chinese People's Army. The two best known champions of the idea of productive army were Colonel Taher and Lt. Colonel Ziauddin. They argued that in a poor and underdeveloped country like Bangladesh, a conventional army would only mean a greater economic burden on the people or dependence on foreign military assistance. In his testimony, Colonel Taher clearly stated, "During my career as a soldier, I realised that a standing army was a burden on the national economies of developing and underdeveloped countries. This form of army is an obstacle to any social progress. It makes no contribution whatsoever to national production." He advocated a 'self-reliant' approach according to which all the soldiers were at the same time to be either workers or farmers.

The majority of the Bangladesh military elite, however, felt that the idea of 'productive army' would not work in Bangladesh. They argued that in order to have the Chinese type of people's army, social regimentation was needed. Without the total regimentation of a society like China or other socialist states, the raising of 'people's army' would lead to war-lordism and internecine conflicts within the country, adversely affecting all developmental and institution building activities.

The prevalence of antagonistic views regarding the role of the armed forces in a newly independent country and the inculcation of revolutionary ideas like Marxism among a section of the army personnel clearly demonstrated a high level of politicisation of the Bangladesh armed forces.

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7 See Lifschultz, n. 4, p. 85.
8 As the Commander of the Comilla Brigade in 1972, Colonel Taher tried to implement his theory of a 'productive army'. In Comilla, all the officers and jawans had to participate in the cultivation of crops. The men of this brigade were referred to as 'plough soldiers'. For details see "Agony of Independence," in Far Eastern Economic Review, August 16, 1974, p. 14; and "Mutiny on Behalf of the People", in Far Eastern Economic Review, December 5, 1975, p. 31.
9 See Khan, n. 1, p. 142.
Dismissal of the Political Ideologues

The political ideology of some of the freedom fighters was based on the premise that the army should be used as an instrument for social change in Bangladesh. They were affiliated to Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) - the party that stood for 'scientific socialism'. A popular freedom fighter, Major M.A. Jalil, became the President of JSD after he was released from service. Colonel Abu Taher also incurred the wrath of the ruling Awami League regime for his leftist leanings and was forcibly retired from the Bangladesh Army. He, too, joined JSD in 1973 and established its armed wing - Biplobi Gono Bahini. Working under the conditions of illegality, Gono Bahini succeeded in infiltrating the lower echelons of the armed forces, particularly among the Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Cadres of Gono Bahini organised several clandestine cells called Biplobi Sainik Sangsthas in the cantonments like Dhaka, Comilla, Bogra, Rangpur, Chittagong etc.

Another freedom fighter, Lt. Colonel Ziauddin joined the underground communist movement. In 1972, he was appointed Commander of the most important army unit, the Dhaka Brigade. But soon he became deeply disillusioned over the political direction of the country. In an article in the opposition weekly, Holiday, Lt. Colonel Ziauddin accused the Mujib government of not fulfilling the goals of independence.

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10 Major Jalil commanded the Mukti Bahini in the Khulna sector during the Liberation War. However, in January 1972, he was arrested for 'insubordination'. He was released subsequently following a trial which exonerated him, and reinstated in July the same year. But, for his involvement in political activities he was compulsorily retired from the army. After his dismissal from service, he joined active politics. For details see Jyoti Sengupta's, Bangladesh: In Blood and Tears (Calcutta: Naya Prakash, 1981), and P. B. Sinha's, Armed Forces of Bangladesh (New Delhi: Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, 1979), Occasional Paper No. 1, p. 30.

11 According to Emajuddin Ahmed, Biplobi Sainik Sangsthas existed in different army units in the form of study groups, clubs, work camps etc. The main purpose of these Sangsthas was to generate consciousness among the Sepoys about the nature of discriminations existing between them and officers. See his Military Rule and Myth of Democracy (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1988), p. 105. A retired army officer has pointed out that the study groups also used to discuss the prevailing political and economic conditions of Bangladesh. See Major (retd.) Rafiqul Islam's, Bangladesh: Samarik Sashan O Ganotantrer Sankat (Dhaka: University Press Limited., 1989), p. 41.
He wrote:

"... independence has become an agony for the people of this country. Stand on the street and you see purposeless, spiritless, lifeless faces going through the mechanics of life. Generally, after a liberation war, the 'new spirit' carries the people through and the country builds itself out of nothing. For everyone life becomes a challenge, and they meet it fearlessly. In Bangladesh today the story is simply the other way round. The whole of Bangladesh is either begging or singing the sad songs or shouting without awareness ..... The hungry and the poor are totally lost...This country is on the verge of falling into the abyss."\(^\text{12}\)

He then concluded with a harsh statement against the Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujib. Referring to Mujib, who had spent nine months of the Liberation War in a Pakistani prison, Lt. Colonel Ziauddin commented: "We fought without him and won, and now if need be, we will fight again. Nothing can beat us. We can be destroyed but not defeated."\(^\text{13}\)

His remarks in the article created a furore in the government circle. When it was brought to the notice of Sheikh Mujib, Lt. Colonel Ziauddin was asked to offer an official apology for that kind of 'soldierly disobedience'. On his refusal to do that, Lt. Colonel Ziauddin was dismissed from service. In 1974, he joined Siraj Sikdar's Purba Bangla Sarbohara Party and tried to organise armed rebellion in the southern part of Bangladesh.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\) See Lt. Colonel M. Ziauddin's, "Hidden Prize", in Holiday, August 20, 1972.

\(^{13}\) The full text of the article is reproduced in Appendix A, p. 239.

\(^{14}\) For details see "Agony of Independence", n. 8, p. 15; and "The Red Colonel Goes to Jail", in Far Eastern Economic Review, January 30, 1976, p. 21.
Antagonism between the Freedom Fighters and the Repatriates

The new Bangladesh armed forces were mainly composed of the freedom fighters. The Bengali military personnel who had been stationed in West Pakistan and could not participate in the Liberation War were repatriated in 1973. The inclusion of the repatriates added a new twist to the internal schisms in the Bangladesh armed forces. Three full battalions of the East Bengal Regiment returned from Pakistan with all their men, but were deliberately split up and dispersed throughout the army. The choice of who was to be incorporated into the army, and in what rank was decided on the basis of loyalty and closeness to Sheikh Mujib and the Awami League. 15

In the early seventies, the freedom fighters used to dominate the military decision making because of their close proximity to the Mujib regime. For their heroic role in the Liberation War, the freedom fighters' standing in the society was much higher than that of the repatriates. After independence, they were given two years of seniority in the service by the Awami League government as a gesture of appreciation. The repatriates, on the other hand, were treated as 'collaborators' and 'potential traitors'. 16 They were either retired prematurely or posted to insignificant commands. Several senior repatriated officers, however, resented bitterly their placement in subordination to officers who were junior to them in the Pakistan Army. A number of officers were also transferred to civilian posts. For instance, Lt. General K. Wasiuddin, the seniormost army officer after his return from Pakistan was appointed as an Officer on Special Duty in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which he did not like. He said, "Repatriates stranded in Pakistan accepted with pride and joy the gallant performance of the freedom fighters and did not grudge

16 Kazi Sahed Ahmed - a former repatriate officer, has observed that the returnees were not fully trusted in the army. The freedom fighters called them 'half-Razakars'. For details see his article, "Army", in Ajker Kogaj, November 7, 1995.
them the honour and glory that they had won and any monetary or other accepted awards they received as a result of it. But they could not swallow the loss of seniority they had to suffer and this was absolutely non-traditional".  

The discord between the freedom fighters and the repatriates had an ideological dimension too. The repatriated armed personnel were trained in the Pakistan Military Academy in an anti-Indian orientation and indoctrinated into Islamic ideology. They retained much of the conservative outlook since they did not undergo the experience of fighting a guerrilla war. The repatriates remained, by and large, as professionally committed loyal soldiers. They were less ideologically motivated and were opposed to the establishment of a people's army and a socialist state.  

The freedom fighters, on the other hand, were highly nationalistic because of their active participation in the liberation struggle and a section of them were indoctrinated with radical ideas.

In the post-liberation period, the ruling Awami League regime could not evolve a common ideological framework for the Bangladesh armed forces. The institution building process in the armed forces was ignored by the political leadership of Bangladesh. Instead, the Awami League regime encouraged internal cleavages by political patronage and setting one faction against the other which finally resulted in sharpening the internal cleavages and further politicising the armed forces of Bangladesh.  

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19 Some senior army officers held the view that it was Mujib who adopted the policy of divide and rule in the armed forces, getting rid of any one who seemed to be a threat to him. For example, Major General M.A. Manzur, a valiant freedom fighter, was sent by Mujib to New Delhi as military attache in the Bangladesh High Commission in 1973. Referring to Sheikh Mujib, he said, “It was he who divided the army into so many groups. He called them separately, giving one a promotion, another a perk. Things were done without reference to the Chief of Staff.” See Anthony Mascarenhas, Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood (London: Hadder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 34.
Military's Disenchantment with the Civilian Rule

Despite personal and ideological rivalries, the armed forces personnel had one thing in common — they were not satisfied with the mode of functioning of the civilian regime of Sheikh Mujib, particularly its handling of the defence establishment.

The creation of a parallel armed force — the *Jatiyo Rakhi Bahini* (JRB) owing exclusive allegiance to Sheikh Mujib and his government irked the regular members of the armed forces. The JRB was supposed to reduce the influence of the Pakistan trained Bengali military personnel and counter balance those sections of the freedom fighters within the Bangladesh armed forces which affiliated themselves to ideological camps other than the Awami League. What antagonised the military personnel was Sheikh Mujib's preferential treatment of this well-equipped elite para-military force as compared to the meagre facilities provided to the regular armed forces.

The period between 1972-75 was marked by systemic weakness and performance failures of the Awami League regime. In the face of growing economic crises, social and political instability, increasingly violent role of the radical political forces, widespread corruption and fast deteriorating law and order situation in the country, the Awami League regime had to turn to the army to bring matters under control. In 1973-74, Sheikh Mujib asked the army to move to the aid of civil administration to tackle insurgency in the country side, check smuggling and hoarding and so on. The army personnel were fairly successful in their missions. But Sheikh Mujib called off the operation halfway.

During the combing operations, the army arrested a good number of political leaders belonging to the ruling Awami League and its affiliated organisations who put pressure on the government to terminate the operation. Mujib's decision to stand by his followers, some of whom were found to be involved in heinous crimes, alienated the
army personnel who were questioning the Awami League government's commitment to social justice.

Through their active participation in the civilian affairs of the state, the armed forces became aware of the basic weaknesses of the Awami League regime, particularly about the people's lack of faith in the regime's ability to govern. Thus the army which lost its esprit de corps in the early years regained confidence and began to nurse a feeling that the military alone could save the nation.

The Bangladesh Army was totally disenchanted with the government when Sheikh Mujib introduced a single party system in the form of BAKSAL. Like many other social groups and institutions, the military was also opposed to the idea of a one party totalitarian BAKSAL. The new system envisaged that the units of Bangladesh Army, BDR, JRB and police stationed in the districts would be under the control of the Governor. This prompted the top brass of the armed forces to think that Sheikh Mujib was trying to bring the armed forces completely under the control of the one party government.

The August 15, 1975 Coup

Such discontent in the armed forces was carefully exploited by the disgruntled and hostile political groups, both within and outside the BAKSAL. On August 15, 1975, a group of junior army officers assassinated Sheikh Mujib and brought to an abrupt end the political regime in Bangladesh before the proposed reforms under the BAKSAL scheme could be implemented. The coup leaders hastily formed a new government headed by Khondker Mushtaque Ahmed, the Foreign Trade Minister in the Mujib Cabinet.

The August 15 coup created a highly volatile situation within the Bangladesh Army. It severely undermined the unified command structure of the army. The coup was planned and executed by a small group of junior officers, the Bangladesh Army as a whole was not involved in it. The senior officers who maintained their control over the troops, wanted the junior officers to return to their cantonments and accept their command. The coup leaders, however, refused to do that fearing that they would be disarmed. They also began to influence the major government policies.

The Counter Coup of November 3, 1975

For two months, an uneasy power struggle continued between the junior officers and the army high command. The highhandedness of the August coup leaders created a serious dissatisfaction among a section of the senior army officers resulting in another coup on November 3, 1975 led by Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf, the Chief of General Staff. President Khondker Mushtaque Ahmed was forced to resign. Major General Ziaur Rahman who succeeded Major General K.M. Safiullah as the Chief of Army Staff after the August coup, was placed under house arrest. Brigadier Khaled appointed himself Chief of Staff in Zia's place and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, A.S.M. Sayem was sworn in as President on November 6.

In spite of all his efforts, Brigadier Khaled failed to consolidate his position within the army and to gain the confidence of the political elites. From the very beginning, he and his supporters showed themselves to be indecisive and politically inept. From November 3 to 5, Bangladesh was practically without a government. The coup leaders

21 Brigadier Khaled's forces were manned by a few battalions of soldiers from the 46 (Dhaka) Brigade, some members from JRB, and a few battalions of BDR. The senior officers involved in the counter coup were - Brigadier Nuruzzaman, former JRB chief; Brigadier Rouf, Director General of Defence Forces Intelligence; Colonel Shafat Jamil, Commander of Dhaka Brigade; Colonel Amzad, Commander of Comilla Brigade; and veteran freedom fighter, Lt. Colonel Haider. See William Mattern's, "Burying the Memory of Mujib", in Far Eastern Economic Review, November 21, 1975, pp. 18-20.
did not form a government immediately after seizing power, which could have strengthened their power base. This created a political vacuum in Bangladesh.

The November 7, 1975 Sepoy Mutiny and its Consequences

Meanwhile, the underground *Gono Bahini* emerged on the scene and started mobilising the lower ranks of the army. *Gono Bahini* cadres distributed thousands of leaflets on November 5 and 6 urging the soldiers to attack their officers and overthrow the 'intriguers' who had seized power. On November 7, only four days after capturing power, Brigadier Khaled and his supporters were overwhelmed by a soldiers' uprising. While attempting to escape from the cantonment, Brigadier Khaled and some of his supporters were killed by mutinous soldiers. Major General Zia was reinstalled as the Chief of Army Staff.22

The November 7 Sepoy Mutiny had two-prong objectives. Its first objective was to remove Brigadier Khaled, free Major General Zia from detention and restore him to the Chief of Army Staff. The second and the more significant objective was to establish a revolutionary army - a people's army in the country which would stand as the armed forces of the 'poorer class' against and over the bourgeois echelons of the officer corps and the bourgeoisie itself.23

The 'Twelve Point Demands' put forward by the revolutionary soldiers ranged from a call for the establishment of a people's army to the total abolition of the British military rules and regulations that still dominated the military procedures in Bangladesh. Among the twelve demands was included the idea of the formation of a 'classless army' as the first step towards the establishment of a 'classless society in Bangladesh'.

The other demands were equally radical. They included: complete equality between soldiers and officers; the selection of officers from among the ranks of common soldiers in the place of existing system of recruitment from the elite groups through the cadet colleges and public schools; higher pay for soldiers and NCOs; abolition of batmen.

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22 For details see "Mutiny on Behalf of the People", n. 8, p. 31.
23 "Bangladesh: State and Revolution - I", *Frontier*, vol. VIII, no. 30, December 6, 1975, p. 3.
system under the which the sepoys were required to serve as domestic servants to the officers - a legacy of the British Indian Army; and so on. 24

JSD leaders and Colonel Taher, the Commander of the Gono Bahini tried to capitalise on the prevailing class contradictions within the armed forces. In Bangladesh armed forces, the officer corps belonged to the affluent families whereas the common soldiers came from the modest lower middle-class background. However, along with the radical elements, some pro-Islamic and anti-Mujib forces also took part in the mutiny. Colonel Taher succeeded in enlisting their support by projecting Brigadier Khaled as a Muijibite and raised the bogey of 'Indian hegemony'. They did this to accelerate the fall of Brigadier Khaled. At the same time, much of the ideological strength of the revolutionaries got diminished. Major General Zia refused to go along with the Gono Bahini and its 'Twelve Point Demands'.

The Sepoy Mutiny brought about far-reaching consequences in the Bangladesh Army. The animosity between ideologically committed Gono Bahini and its sympathisers to a 'people's army' and a Marxist state and the status quoists eventually took the form of open confrontation between the soldiers and officers. The radical soldiers' revolutionary theory that the class struggle should first begin within the armed forces, pushed them directly against the officer corps. The mutinous soldiers killed at least 34 officers in Dhaka Cantonment alone and nearly 100 soldiers lost their lives in other cantonments. It was reported that Bangladesh remained in a state of virtual anarchy for about three weeks after the soldiers' uprising of November 7, which had spread to the garrisons of Rangpur in the north, Comilla in the east and Chittagong in the south. 25

The critical situation inside the cantonments compelled Zia to take immediate steps. He took a determined stand to reestablish the chain of command within the Bangladesh Army which was shattered during the uprising. The rebellious army units like the Bengal Lancers and some regiments of the Dhaka Brigade were regrouped and

24 See E. Ahmed, n. 11, pp. 197-98.
dispersed throughout the country. A decree issued on November 15 made incitement of members of the armed forces to mutiny or rebellion punishable by death, transportation for life or 14 years rigorous imprisonment. On November 23 and 24, 1975, several JSD leaders including Colonel Taher were arrested. This was followed by a general crackdown throughout the country against the JSD. In a nation-wide broadcast on November 24, Zia denounced "elements engaged in sinister political activities" who were "trying to join hand with forces opposed to the country's sovereignty" and "using the armed forces to achieve their selfish interests". 26

The trial of Colonel Taher on the charges of attempting to overthrow the government and subvert the armed forces opened in Dhaka Central Jail on June 21, 1976 before a Special Military Tribunal, chaired by Colonel Yusuf Haider, a repatriate officer. On July 17, Colonel Taher was sentenced to death.

**Different Factions of the Bangladesh Military**

The execution of Colonel Taher temporarily demoralised the radical elements, but the army continued to be riven by factions and ideological schisms. By mid-1976, four distinct groups emerged within the Bangladesh military, namely: Zia loyalists, Mujibites, leftists and the Islamic right. 27

The first group consisted of the supporters of the then Army Chief, Major General Zia. He was popular among the officers and jawans for the declaration of Bangladesh's independence on March 27, 1971 and his leadership qualities. 28 He had good relations with both the freedom fighters like Major General Mir Shaukat Ali, Major General Nurul Islam Sishu, Colonel Ali Ahmed and many others and the senior repatriate officers whose experience of West Pakistan and professional military training he had shared. 29 But he relied on the repatriates whom he considered more professional. He promoted them to

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26 Ibid.
27 See Keeling's Contemporary Archives, October 15, 1976, p. 27989.
28 According to Justice A.S.M. Sayem, former President of Bangladesh, Zia was a 'natural leader of the army'. See his memoir, At Bangabhavan: Last Phase (Dhaka: Hakkani Publishers, 1988), p. 41.
higher ranks and positions. For instance, Major General H.M. Ershad, a repatriate officer, was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff. The repatriates remained loyal to Zia in order to protect their corporate interests which were threatened by the subaltern groups within the armed forces.

The second group can be identified as Mujibists. They believed in the four state principles espoused by the Awami League regime - nationalism, socialism secularism and democracy and owed personal loyalty to Sheikh Mujib. The August 15, 1975 political changeover was a major setback for them. Since then, most of the Mujib supporters inside the armed forces such as Major General Safiullah, Air Vice Marshal A.K. Khondkar, Colonel Shafat Jamil, Colonel Shaukat Ali and others were asked to retire. After the November 7 soldiers' uprising, about eight battalions known for their pro-Mujib inclinations deserted the cantonments of Dhaka, Chittagong and Rangpur along with their officers fearing reprisals. A well-known Mujib supporter — Kader Siddiqui organised a guerrilla movement against the Zia regime and was supported by a section of the army officers led by Major General Nuruzzaman.31

The armed forces personnel affiliated to various extremist socialist parties could be placed in the third category. Among them, the JSD had the maximum number of following in the armed forces, particularly in the lower ranks.

The fourth group consisted of rightists and pro-Islamic forces who were largely responsible for the August 15 coup. Although the coup leaders had been forced to go into exile, they had several sympathisers inside the two armoured regiments of the Bangladesh Army - Bengal Lancers and 1st Bengal Cavalry. The then Chief of Air Staff, Air Vice Marshal M.G. Tawab was the leader of the reactionary and right-wing officers of Bangladesh military. In March 1976, he organised a 50,000-strong demonstration in Dhaka of religious extremists like Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim League which had

30 See n. 25, p. 27523.
31 He was the former chief of JRB. After the merger of the JRB with the army, Major General Nuruzzaman, a suspect in the eyes of the army high command, was given an innocuous command post in one of the outlying garrison. See Sinha, n. 10, p. 38.
32 See n. 27.
opposed the secession from Pakistan in 1971. They called for immediate abolition of the constitutional clause separating religion from the state.

In April 1976, Air Vice Marshal Tawab brought back three of the Mujib killers - Lt. Colonels Farooq, Rashid and Shariful Huq. Lt. Colonel Farooq joined his old regiment, the Bengal Lancers, now stationed at Bogra and tried to incite rebellion. With the support of Air Vice Marshal Tawab, the Mujib killers demanded a share of political power and transformation of Bangladesh into an Islamic republic. On April 29, Lt. Colonels Rashid and Shariful Huq were expelled from the country and Air Vice Marshal Tawab was forced to resign with effect from April 30. The officers of the Bengal Lancers and the 1st Bengal Cavalry were reported to have mutinied on May 8 when Lt. Colonel Farooq was ordered to surrender, but Zia soon reestablished his control over the rebellious units. Lt. Colonel Farooq was expelled from Bangladesh on May 9. Zia subsequently disbanded the Bengal Lancers after another mutiny in June 1976, and half of its 500 members were arrested and tried by Martial Law Tribunals.33

The September 30, 1977 Bogra Mutiny

In spite of taking such coercive measures, Zia failed to discipline the Bogra troops. On September 30, 1977, an armoured unit at Bogra revolted against the army high command. An official statement said that during the night of September 29-30, 'unpatriotic elements' had attempted to stir up a rebellion among the armed forces, but had been joined only by a 'handful' of men, who had engaged in 'looting and anti-social activities'. Although 'patriotic soldiers were immediately successful in resisting the miscreants', an officer had been killed, two officers and a soldier wounded, whilst two other officers were missing and believed killed.34

33 See Kegan, n. 15, p. 40; and n. 27.
34 See Keesing's Contemporary Archives, February 24, 1978, p. 28844.
However, unofficial reports indicated that the rebellious troops took over Bogra and marched through the streets shouting anti-government slogans. They also broke open the jail and freed some of the political prisoners.\(^{35}\)

**The October 2, 1977 Abortive Coup and its Aftermath**

Only two days later, on October 2, 1977, some airmen along with a group of JCOs, NCOs and jawans attempted to stage a coup while the Zia government was preoccupied with members of a Japanese 'Red Army' commando which had hijacked an airliner four days earlier and forced it to land in Dhaka. The mutinous airmen killed 11 air force officers and stormed the control tower at Dhaka airport where the senior air force officers were negotiating with the Japanese hijackers. The Dhaka-based 46 Brigade soon came to Zia's rescue and put down the rebellion. The then Chief of General Staff, Major General M.A. Manzur also played a key role in suppressing the bloody coup attempt. It was reported that about 230 people, mostly military personnel, were killed in the fighting.\(^{36}\)

Different interpretations have been advanced to explain the causes of the October 2, 1977 abortive coup. A noted Bangladeshi political analyst is of the opinion that the revolt originated in a conflict between the officers and the rank and file over pay and service conditions. In September 1977, rumour spread in the cantonments that the new scales of pay recommended by the Pay and Service Commission for the armed forces had been heavily weighed in favour of the officers and that the interests of the lower ranks had been neglected. This rumour caused resentment among the jawans and various politicised groups within the armed forces tried to exploit the sentiments of the jawans for realising their own political ends.\(^{37}\)

According to another source, the October 2 coup was instigated by the radical elements within the armed forces who were opposed to the British military assistance to

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35 See Sinha, n. 10, p. 43.
36 See n. 34.
37 See Maniruzzaman, n. 2, p. 220.
the Bangladesh armed forces. In July 1977, an eight-member British military advisory team headed by Colonel T.A. Gibson arrived in Dhaka. The ostensible object of the Gibson Mission was to set up a Military Staff College in Bangladesh. But rumour spread that the real purpose of the British Mission was to prepare dossiers for Western intelligence on the entire officer corps and the Bangladesh Army in particular. Gibson and other members of his team were depicted in the Bangladesh Army circles as senior members of the 'Special Air Services Brigade' - the elite counter-insurgency unit of the British Army. Infuriated by the Gibson Mission's presence in Dhaka, the radical elements in the air force and army, who had been demanding total abolition of British colonial practices within the armed forces in Bangladesh since November 7, 1975, made a pre-emptive bid to topple the Zia regime.\(^{38}\)

Although the October 2 coup attempt failed, it terribly jolted the military establishment in Bangladesh. Immediately after the coup, hundreds of armed forces personnel were arrested. It was officially announced on October 18, 1977 that 37 members of the army and air force had been executed for their involvement in the October 2 coup. A subsequent announcement on October 26, stated that 55 soldiers had been sentenced to death in connection with the Bogra mutiny.\(^{39}\) However, unofficial reports suggest that about 800 servicemen were convicted by secret military tribunals, of whom 600, mostly from the air force, were executed by firing-squad or hanging.\(^{40}\)

Following the October 2 coup attempt, a number of senior air force officers were compulsorily retired and the air force and navy chiefs were relieved of their positions as Deputy Martial Law Administrators.\(^{41}\) The army high command was also reshuffled. Major General Mir Shaukat Ali, G-O-C of 9 Infantry Division in Dhaka was sent to command troops in Jessore and Major General Manzur, Chief of General Staff, was sent to Chittagong as the G-O-C. of 24 Infantry Division. Brigadier M.Nooruddin was


\(^{39}\) See n. 34.

\(^{40}\) See n. 38, p. 551-52.

\(^{41}\) See Kegan, n. 15, p. 44.
appointed G-O-C of Comilla Division and senior repatriate officers were brought to Dhaka to replace them.\textsuperscript{42} The Chief of the Bangladesh Rifles, Major General Kazi Golam Datagir was retired and given an ambassadorial post.\textsuperscript{43}

**Zia's Consolidation Efforts**

In order to bring stability within the armed forces, Zia raised one more division consisting of new recruits who were perceived to be less politicised and more amenable to the new chain of command. Zia met some of the financial demands of the soldiers. He increased their salary and improved the overall service conditions. The Military Academy and Staff College were established for better training of officers. He tried to develop the army as a truly professional institution. To neutralise the military dissidents, Zia expanded the para-military force - Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and raised an elite 12,500 - men special police force.

Zia's aim was to insulate the armed forces from politics and he concentrated his efforts on building a civilian political base. A national referendum was held on May 30, 1977. The electorate was asked to approve Major General Zia as President. Zia won a massive vote of confidence with an affirmative vote of 98.88% from among 88.5% voter turnout.\textsuperscript{44}

Confident of the public support for himself and seeking to enhance his legitimacy, Zia announced eleven months after the referendum that there would be an election for the presidency. When the presidential election was held, as scheduled, on June 3, 1978, Zia won a landslide victory, securing 76% of the more than 53% voter turnout.\textsuperscript{45}

Zia also launched a new political party - the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which won a majority of seats in the parliamentary election held on February 18, 1979.

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\textsuperscript{43} See Maniruzzaman, n. 2, p. 222.


President Zia announced in a broadcast on April 6 that the martial law had been lifted, and said that this measure would usher in "civilian democratic rule and sovereign parliament". 46

Zia relinquished the post of Chief of Army Staff in 1978 to become a fully 'civilian' President. Major General H.M. Ershad, a repatriate and most trusted senior officer, was appointed new Chief of Army Staff.

Though himself a freedom fighter, Zia relied heavily on the repatriates whom he regarded as more loyal and disciplined. Zia's preference for the repatriated officers is manifested in the fact that in 1981 only two of the top 50 major generals and brigadiers in the Bangladesh Army were men who had taken part in the Liberation War of 1971. Of the two, only Major General Manzur had troops under his command. The other freedom fighter was Major General Mir Shaukat Ali, who had already been stripped of his command by Zia and was made Principal Staff Officer to the President. 47

Zia's continued preference for the repatriates, however, alienated him from those officers and soldiers who had fought for independence. During 1975-81, Bangladesh witnessed as many as 26 coup attempts against Zia. 48 All these coups are believed to have been engineered by the freedom fighters. The most often cited reason for the repeated coup attempts was the presence of pervasive factional rivalries among the freedom fighters.

Assassination of Ziaur Rahman

Despite all his efforts, Zia could not eliminate opposition within the army. He was killed on May 30, 1981, in an abortive coup in the south-eastern town of Chittagong allegedly led by Major General Manzur, Commander of the 24 Infantry Division. Zia's assassination is regarded as the last attempt of the freedom fighters to capture state power.

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46 See Keesing's Contemporary Archives, August 10, 1979, p. 29770.
According to one observer of political development in Bangladesh, Zia's consistent effort to dissociate the armed forces from the national decision making process was strongly resented by the military elite. On May 20, 10 days before the coup, Major General Manzur reported to have met President Zia in Dhaka with other divisional commanders and criticised him severely for 'over-democratising' the political system. They held Zia responsible for growing corruption and deteriorating law and order situation in the country. The overwhelming demand of the army top brass was the reimposition of martial law accompanied by press censorship, restriction on political activities and curtailment of certain fundamental rights.49

The precipitating factor of the May 30 coup was, however, Manzur's personal grudge against Zia. On May 27, Zia issued orders for Manzur's transfer to Dhaka as Commandant of the Defence Services Command and Staff College. Manzur was asked to join the new post on June 1. But a post without any command over troops was unacceptable to Manzur. On May 30, while Zia was on an official tour in Chittagong, Manzur made a desperate attempt to remove him from power.

Manzur's rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed.50 A military court of inquiry was appointed on June 2 to "identify the culprits responsible for the brutal killing of President Zia", and a special court martial was set up to try them. The military court of inquiry headed by Major General Muzammel Hossain prepared a report which was published as the government's White Paper on the Chittagong mutiny and the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman.51

The trial of 31 officers - all freedom fighters, on charges of mutiny and insubordination leading to the death of the President, opened in Chittagong prison on July 49 For details see Franda, n. 47, pp. 1387-88.

50 The May 30 coup attempt was foiled by the troops loyal to Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General H.M. Ershad. Manzur was arrested on June 2 while attempting to escape and shot dead in mysterious circumstances. For details see Zillur Rahman Khan's, Martial to Martial Law: Leadership Crisis in Bangladesh (Dhaka: University Press Limited,1984) pp. 218-19.

51 According to the White Paper issued by the government in August 1981, the Chittagong coup was plotted by Manzur and some of his mid-ranking officers. The White Paper said that Manzur was ambitious, jealous and obsessed with the idea that the country must be ruled by the freedom fighters. See the text of the White Paper in Holiday, 9, 16 and 23 August, 1981.
before a seven-member Field General Court martial presided over by Major General M. Abdur Rahman. The court found 29 of the accused guilty, two being acquitted, and on August 11, sentenced 12 to death\textsuperscript{52} and 12 more of the accused to various terms of imprisonment, while 5 others were retired from the army.\textsuperscript{53} Despite strong protests from veteran freedom fighters like Lt. Colonel (retd.) Kazi Nuruzzaman, Colonel (retd.) Shaukat Ali and Lt. Colonel (retd.) M. Ziauddin, and various pro-liberation organisations, the 12 death sentences were executed on September 23, 1981.\textsuperscript{54}

The trials portended a major purge of the freedom fighters. Three senior freedom fighters - Major General Mir Shaukat Ali, Major General Mainul Hassan Choudhury and Air Vice Marshal Sadruddin, and two brigadiers were compulsorily retired. According to one source, about 60 senior to mid-level freedom fighters considered potentially 'disciplinary problems', were either dismissed or retired from service.\textsuperscript{55}

After all these executions and dismissals, the strength of the freedom fighters in the Bangladesh Army came down to less than 10%. Besides, they also became weak in terms of leadership. With the killing of Manzur, none of the freedom fighters were in command positions. The Bangladesh Army high command was now solely composed of repatriate generals. They soon intensified their efforts on building a disciplined and cohesive army in Bangladesh. By the end of 1981, the repatriates emerged as a dominant politico-military force under the leadership of Lt. General H.M. Ershad.

Ershad’s Role in Post-Zia Political Development

The Bangladesh military not only suppressed the May 30, 1981 coup, but also facilitated the civilian succession process. Vice President Abdus Sattar was appointed

\textsuperscript{52} The 12 officers sentenced to death were: Brigadier Mohsin Uddin Ahmed; Colonels M. Abdur Rashid, Nowajish Uddin; Lt. Colonels A.Y.M. Mahfuzur Rahman, M. Delwar Hossain; Majors Mominul Huq, A.Z. Giasuddin Ahmed, Rowshan Yazdani Bhuiyan, Mujibur Rahman; Captains Janmil Huque, M. A. Sattar; and Lieutenant M. Rafique Hassan Khan. See the Bangladesh Observer, September 14, 1981.

\textsuperscript{53} Keessing’s Contemporary Archives, October 9, 1981, p. 31127.

\textsuperscript{54} For details see Lt. Colonel (retd.) K. Nuruzzaman’s, \textit{Muktijoddha O Rajniti} (Dhaka: Dana Prakashani, 1985), pp. 27-30.

acting President. On June 4, Sattar announced that in accordance with the Constitution, the presidential election would be held within 180 days. Sattar was nominated by the ruling BNP as its presidential candidate on June 22.

However, a section of the BNP opposed to Sattar's candidature, pointed out that as he held an 'office of profit', he was not eligible to stand under the Constitution. At this stage, Army Chief Lt. General Ershad personally intervened to resolve the constitutional deadlock and internal conflict of the BNP. He tried to persuade the dissidents within the BNP to effect a constitutional amendment so that Sattar could contest the presidential election.

Finally, on July 8, 1981, the Sixth Amendment Act was incorporated in the Constitution enabling Sattar to contest the election without resignation from his office. The amendment excluded the office of President and Vice President or Acting President from being 'office of profit'.

Ershad's role in the selection of presidential candidate strengthened his position. He immediately demanded a more active role for the Bangladesh armed forces in the national decision making process. In an interview on October 7, 1981, he pointed out that the army had assassinated two presidents and, that there had been numerous coup attempts in the past. "To stop further coups", he argued, "if the army participates in the administration of the country, then they will probably have a feeling that they are also involved, and they will not be frustrated."

56 Clause 2 of Article 123 of the Bangladesh Constitution says, "In case of a vacancy in the office of President occurring by reason of the death, resignation or removal of the President, an election to fill the vacancy shall be held within the period of one hundred and eighty days after the occurrence of the vacancy". See *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, as modified up to June 30, 1988, (Dhaka: Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, n.d), p. 107.

57 See n. 53.

58 Clause 2A of Article 66 of the Bangladesh Constitution debars an incumbent President or Vice President from contesting election. See *The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*, n. 56, p. 51.

59 See *Holiday*, October 18, 1981.


Ershad's growing interest in political affairs was further manifested when, prior to the presidential election, he expressed military's reservation about the Awami League candidate, Dr. Kamal Hossain. According to one report, Ershad even proposed to Sattar in October that the election should be cancelled and martial law introduced, as large crowds attracted by Awami League meetings suggested that Dr. Hossain would win the election. Sattar, however, replied that he would immediately resign if army seized power. The army leaders abandoned their plan only after reports from police headquarters throughout the country had shown that Sattar was well ahead of Dr. Hossain.62

Dr. Kamal Hossain - a close associate of Mujib, was not acceptable to the repatriates because they perceived that Awami League's coming to power would adversely affect military's corporate interests. Moreover, they were opposed to Awami League's policy of secularism and 'pro-Indian' foreign policy.

**Bangladesh Army's Demand for a Political Role**

Ershad also made it known that the army would take part in the administration of the country and after the presidential election, the constitution would be amended accordingly. But a newly confident Sattar after his landslide victory in the November 15, 1981 presidential election categorically rejected any role for the armed forces, other than defending Bangladesh's independence and sovereignty.63

Ershad responded two weeks later with a press statement in which he addressed the issue of military's role in Bangladesh polity quite explicitly. He said, "Experience of the past 10 years have shown that no one has succeeded in keeping our soldiers aloof from the society and its turmoil. It just cannot be done.

Our rank and file do not want military adventurism in politics nor do they want political adventurism in the military. They only want to be with the people helping build democracy, help build effective checks and balances against any future coup attempts."64

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 See the text of Ershad's statement given in Appendix E, pp. 249-52.
The Concept of 'Total National Defence'

While arguing in favour of according the army a role, Ershad claimed that he was also trying to implement the concept of 'total national defence' - an idea originally devised by the late President Zia. To understand this concept, he said it was necessary to depart from the conventional Western ideas of the role of the armed forces. In his words, "it calls for combining the role of nation building and national defence into one concept of total national defence." 65

He pointed out that due to resource constraints, Bangladesh lacked a well-equipped army. The only way to remove this limitation was to "effectively substitute a vast manpower in place of fire power". He said that in order to build a strong army capable of defending the country's border, Bangladesh needed hundreds and thousands of trained soldiers. He recommended that after training them over a number of years, they should not be kept sitting in the barracks, but could be effectively employed for nation building purposes. In addition, many civilians could be trained under national service for a few years and then returned to their previous jobs and employment. Ershad envisaged that over the years, in practically every occupation, Bangladesh would have "people with sufficient military training to take part in national defence in the modern battlefield". Thus, without any strain on the country's economic development, Bangladesh would be able "to mobilise the total national efforts towards total national defence." 66

In order to accomplish this, Ershad proposed the creation of a National Security Council or Defence Council to decide the strategically vital issues of national interest within the constitutional framework of a democratic system. 67

However, it needs to be mentioned that while serving as Chief of Army Staff, Ershad was propagating certain views which were expressly political. He wanted a civilian president elected directly by the people to change the fundamental provisions of

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
the constitution to incorporate an active role for the armed forces in Bangladesh which was against the spirit of democracy. Besides, by taking a political stand, Ershad was also violating army rules.

Ershad addressed the troops in various cantonments and tried to mobilise the rank and file in favour of giving the army a political role. Ershad's statement on the role of the military was distributed among the officers. A booklet was also published dealing with the chronic problems Bangladesh was facing and suggesting the possible role of the armed forces in overcoming such problems. It had two objectives, namely: to expose the corruption and inefficiency of the Sattar regime; and to indoctrinate the troops into Ershad's ideas.

Justifying the role of the armed forces in politics, Ershad argued that the Bangladesh armed forces had fought the Liberation War in 1971 and thereby had become highly politicised. As they had a stake in the country they should be given an effective role in running it. He further added that "with their skill and potentialities, the armed forces could help replenish the shortfall in the country's administrative, technological and engineering sectors. They should, naturally, be utilised for rebuilding an integrated powerful and unified nation".

The Formation of National Security Council

To meet Ershad's demand, President Sattar on January 1, 1982, formed a National Security Council (NSC), consisting of President, Vice President, Prime Minister, four other ministers and the three Chiefs of Staff. However, Ershad did not accept the composition of the NSC which provided an edge to its civilian members over the men in uniform. Under pressure from the armed forces, President Sattar later reduced the size of

the NSC to six, with the President, Vice President and Prime Minister as the only civilian members.\textsuperscript{71}

The functions of the NSC were as follows:

- a) to advise and assist the government in all matters relating to national security.
- b) to examine and make recommendations on the armed forces' requirements.
- c) to co-ordinate the activities of the armed forces and the para-military and civil forces.
- d) to explore ways of ensuring the armed forces' participation in the socio-economic development of the country.\textsuperscript{72}

Theoretically speaking, the NSC was the highest policy making body of the government, but in practice, it soon emerged as a 'super cabinet'. The military elite led by Ershad began to veto major government decisions. On February 11, 1982, President Sattar dismissed his 42-member Council of Ministers and replaced it the following day with a new 18-member cabinet. Reports indicate that Sattar reorganised his cabinet mainly at the insistence of Ershad who objected to the inclusion of certain ministers.\textsuperscript{73}

The admission by the President to the nation about the inefficiency and corruption of his three-month old government\textsuperscript{74} only served the purpose of legitimising military's political role.

**Ershad’s Takeover**

On March 24, 1982, the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General H.M. Ershad ousted President Sattar and his government in a bloodless coup, imposed martial law in the country, dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution. In a broadcast, Ershad claimed that the armed forces had taken over "to save the country and nation from a

\textsuperscript{71} See *Keesing’s Contemporary Archives*, May 28, 1982, p. 31501.

\textsuperscript{72} See n. 61.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} In a nation-wide broadcast on February 11, 1982, President Sattar stated that certain people “at the helm of affairs” had failed in discharging their responsibilities; that the overall situation in the country had deteriorated; and that large-scale corruption jeopardized the welfare of the nation. Ibid.
social, administrative and economic breakdown". Ershad declared himself Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) and two other service chiefs were appointed Deputy Martial Law Administrators (DCMLAs). Ershad divided the whole country into 5 martial law zones and many sub-zones. These zones and sub-zones were administered by the repatriate officers. Thus, under the leadership of Ershad, the repatriates reasserted their authority.

Ershad tried to garner support of the military for his regime by raising salaries and improving the standard of living of the service personnel. Since his takeover in 1982, defence expenditure had been raised in the successive annual budgets. During his rule, the Bangladesh armed forces had been expanded. He procured modern equipment and weapons for the armed forces.

Ershad also pursued a policy of inducting serving and retired officers into state-run corporations and foreign service. The process of militarisation of the civilian administration, initiated by Zia, was intensified during Ershad's rule.

The State of the Bangladesh Armed Forces During Ershad

Ershad, however, was more successful than Zia in restoring discipline and stability within the armed forces, particularly the army. Ershad's frequent meetings with the rank and file consolidated his personal standing and increased loyalty. He exercised complete control over promotions and postings. Ambitious officers were not promoted and in due course retired from service while loyal officers were given key posts such as the command of strategically important 9 Infantry Division at Dhaka. All the divisional

75 See n. 71.
76 Senior repatriate officer, Major General Mohammad Iskandru Karim was appointed special advisor to the CMLA. Other repatriate officers who played a key role in the martial law administration were – Major Generals Abdur Rahman, K.M.A. Wahed, M.J. Choudhury, M. Atiqur Rahman and Nooruddin Khan.
77 See S. Kamaluddin's, "An Army Forged in a Decade of Friction", in Far Eastern Economic Review, September 1, 1983, p. 28.
commanders had to report directly to Ershad. Lt. General M. Atiqur Rahman, who was appointed Chief of Army Staff by Ershad in 1986, remained a ceremonial head with no real control over the troops.\textsuperscript{78}

With the purpose of exercising total command and control over the Bangladesh Army, Ershad instituted the office of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The Chief of Army Staff was empowered to move troops for training purposes up to 30 km from their headquarters. The movement of troops for redeployment or internal security operations could only be undertaken under direct orders of Ershad. The office of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces was also entrusted with the task of coordinating inter-service matters.\textsuperscript{79}

Ershad paid great attention to check factional rivalries among the officers of the Bangladesh Army. Military intelligence organisations were streamlined to monitor closely the mood among troops.\textsuperscript{80} During Ershad, most of the freedom fighter officers were meticulously weeded out. In 1990, out of 20 major generals, only 5 belonged to the freedom fighter category.\textsuperscript{81}

The Fall of the Erashad Regime

Although Ershad’s 9 years of rule had been characterised by a conspicuous absence of any abortive coup or uprising among the soldiers, he nevertheless had faced serious political unrest and opposition from major political parties. In his bid to acquire legitimacy and popular base in Bangladesh, Ershad like his predecessor Zia, resorted to various democratic facades such as holding of local body, parliamentary and presidential


\textsuperscript{81} See Hossain, n. 8, p. 195.
elections. His civilianisation process was completed with the formation of a new political party – the *Jatiyo Party.*

In spite of such efforts, unaccountability of the regime had been a persisting problem for Ershad. Civilian opposition to his military regime continued to grow since the late eighties and Ershad was forced to relinquish power on December 6, 1990.

The Role of the Military in the 1990 Political Changeover

The most crucial factor which quickened the pace of Ershad’s removal from power was the withdrawal of support by the Bangladesh armed forces – so long his primary support base. When the movement for the restoration of democracy intensified by the end of 1990, Ershad asked the army to step in and take control of the country. But the army was not prepared to confront the combined might of the students, opposition groups and masses simply to save Ershad. The top brass and mid-ranking officers held that the army as an institution was greater than any individual or political party. They considered the anti-Ershad movement as a political problem and wanted it to be solved politically.

The Chief of the Army Staff, Lt. General M. Nooruddin Khan, who succeeded Lt. General Atiqur Rahman in August 1990, made it categorically clear that the army was in favour of the restoration of democracy and constitutional rule in Bangladesh. The statement of the army chief reflected a positive change in the attitude of the Bangladesh armed forces. After the fall of Ershad, the armed forces played a pivotal role in

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84 *The Times of India*, December 8, 1990.
safeguarding the administrative system, controlling the law and order situation, and in the transfer of power to a non-partisan and neutral government.\textsuperscript{85}

**Bangladesh Military in the 1990s**

Since 1990, the Bangladesh military has undergone a major change in its composition, socio-economic background and ideological orientation. The post-1971 recruits constitute the majority of rank and file in today’s Bangladesh military as the number of freedom fighters has been steadily decreasing over the years and most of the senior repatriate officers are also on the verge of retirement. The socio-economic background of the military personnel is more egalitarian now than in the past. The ideological orientation and military ethos of the new generation officer corps are quite different from the former categories. The ideological rivalry between the freedom fighters and the repatriates carries little appeal to them. They are very corporate conscious and opposed to any involvement of the military in politics.

\textsuperscript{85} See Matiur Rahman’s, “The Role of the Armed Forces”, in Dhaka Courier, January 11-17, 1991, p. 25.