

Democracy Day '92

Ten Days That Shook Bangladesh

Lessons of 1987 Failure Were Learnt Three Years Later

by Sabir Mustafa

WHEN the crunch came, the rapidity with which former president Lt. Gen (ret'd) Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime crumbled took many people by surprise.

On November 27, 1990, he was aggressive, declaring a state of emergency, imposing curfew for an indefinite period and clamping total censorship on the press.

By December 1, he was somewhat conciliatory, asking the police not to be "brutal", as if policemen had opened fire on unarmed demonstrators all these days for the sheer fun of it.

By December 3, he was a little repentant, saying he was "heart-broken" and offering to resign 15 days before the filing of nomination papers for presidential election.

By the next evening, he was finished as a political force in the country. Gen. Ershad's resignation on December 6 became a formality.

Those 10 days that shook Bangladesh marked the climax of a long period of agitation which had its origins in the student demonstrations and bloody clashes with the police on the Dhaka University campus in November 1982, just eight months after Gen.

Ershad, then Chief of Army Staff, seized control of state power through a bloodless coup d'état.

The lack of an immediate reaction on the streets against this act of piracy showed that the political institutions of the country, both the party in power before the coup and the ones in opposition, were too weak, or disunited or both.

The weakness of the fractured political establishment probably made the army chief think his sailing would be a plain one.

And so it had turned out initially, until the students spoke and the mainstream parties began to regroup their forces.

The bloody police action near the Shishu Academy on Feb. 14, 1983 in which at least two and perhaps as many as 14 people were killed, sealed Ershad's fate.

Student demonstrations of that day, less than a year after he seized power, showed Ershad's stay in office would be

anything but plain sailing. From then on, he had to be on his guard permanently, scheming, bribing, repressing and corrupting virtually all the institutions of the state in order to extend his stay in power.

The mass movement of 1987 again showed what could be achieved if opposition forces worked unitedly; at the same time, the disaster that disunity could bring was also cruelly exposed by the failure of the '87 agitation to shift Ershad.

The lessons of '87 needed to be learnt, and the people had quite a while to wait before the democratic forces of the country managed to join hands.

Not surprisingly, it was the students again who acted as the nucleus around which a greater unity of political parties was formed. In October, 1990 the student community set aside their own differences and joined forces.

By November, a common programme had been worked

out by the Eight-Party, Seven-Party and Five-Party alliances, giving a tremendous boost to the movement already launched by the students.

What distinguished the 1990 programme from its predecessors was that a clear guideline for the transfer of power and holding of parliamentary elections had been announced prior to the launching of the movement.

This was a significant departure from the previous one-point demand for Ershad's removal.

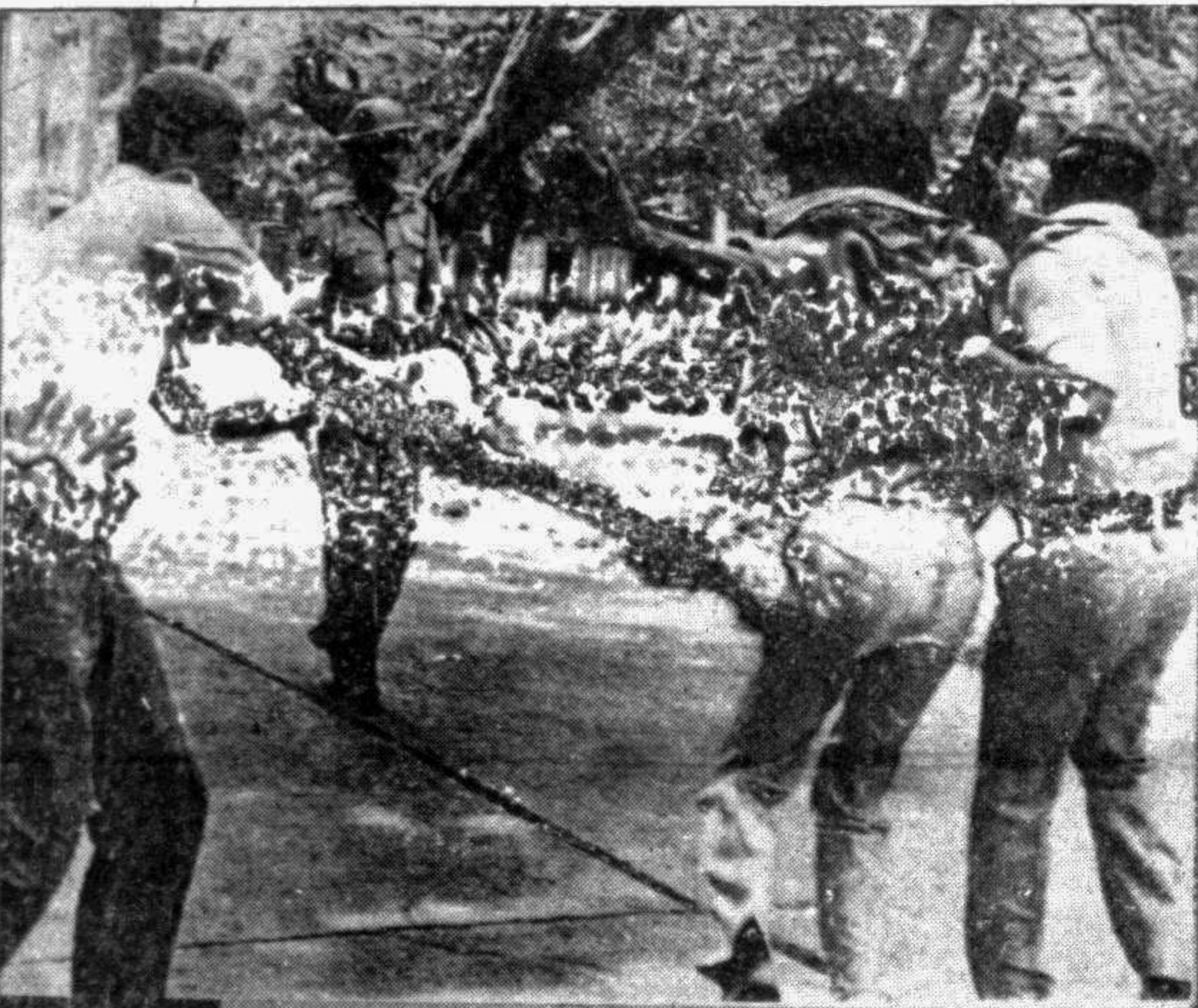
The full participation of professional groups such as cultural workers, lawyers, trade unionists under the SKOP umbrella, journalists etc. in the movement, and their support for the three alliances' Joint Declaration reduced Ershad's room for scheming down to zero.

By the end of November, thousands of people were out in the streets, defying curfew, braving police shootings and arrests, and the movement gained an irresistible momentum.

Ershad's departure on Dec. 6 became a formality.

The years between 1982 to 1990 therefore forms a specific period in our history, with clearly identifiable beginning and end. It was a period of struggle for democracy, to restore civilian, representative rule and transfer political power from the clutches of a military dictator to the people.

All photographs
by
A.K.M.
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Iron-fist response to first challenge: Police attacking student with rifle butt during clashes in Nov 1982.



The first martyr of the struggle: Students carried the body of Zafar in a campus procession Feb 14, 1983. Suddenly, soldiers of the BDR broke into the campus and attacked. Students ran with the corpse, and saved it from falling into police hands.



A unified response: Leaders of various political parties addressing a student rally at Aparajeyo Bangla in 1983 to protest the Feb 14 killings.

A Pictorial History of Bangladesh 1982—1990



The long battle commences: Tear gas shell streaks through the air trailing white smoke as police assault Dhaka University campus to quell student protest, Nov 1982.



A law unto themselves: Army troops humiliate citizens in the street during protests in 1983.



Blood bath at the Shishu Academy Feb 14, 1983: Police guard lifeless bodies of demonstrators after shooting them dead during student demonstrations. Only two bodies were recovered, and as many as 12 were suspected of having been stashed away by police.