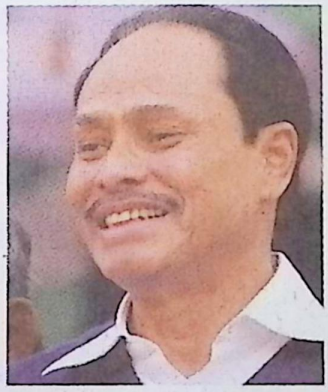
The General and His Labyrinth

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Former dictator Gen (rtd) HM Ershad is in a strange dilemma now. He is ready to leave the Awami League-led Mohajote government, so is the entire presidium of his party, yet Ershad is afraid of making the move. The former President, who has already spent a few years in prison, does not want to go to jail again; and that too at an old age like his. So, Ershad, who is increasingly using extreme rightist rhetoric, is calmly biding time for the opportune moment to arrive so that he can skirt the jail gate and leave Mohajote at the same time.

The dictator, who ruled the country for almost a decade with an iron fist, is finding the present political scenario a missed opportunity. The old cases that are hanging around him like a dead albatross are forcing him to remain in, what his party colleagues are calling, "an unpopular government". In his speeches after coming back from a trip to the US, he is talking about upholding the spirit of Islam and punishing the bloggers "who have made blasphemous comments about the Prophet (peace be upon him) of Islam". He has even called those who 'defame' Islam to change their faith. In a recent visit to a district, the former dictator also promised to give free electricity to mosques and madrasas across the country.



Gen (rtd) HM Ershad

Ershad has found that taking side of Shahbagh might not yield him the result he wanted to get. Instead, the *nastik* (atheist)-blogger issue is now more lucrative to him to manipulate, for most of his voters in Rangpur division are deeply religious and are badly infected by Khaleda Zia and Jamaat's *nastik*-blogger propaganda. Ershad thinks this is where his forte lies, and he might have felt that his moves are not enough to tell his voters that he is more 'Islamic' than BNP and Jamaat put together.

The spectre of jail looms large over his political fortune and the former strongman does not want to take any risk. In a scenario where Ershad is sent to prison in one of the old cases that have dogged him since his ouster from power in a mass upsurge in 1990, Jatya Party (JP), which he heads, might have to face the Balkan effect. In his absence, JP runs the risk of becoming both the major parties' plaything. Ershad does not want that to happen.

Be that as it may, JP's popular support is declining. In the election of 1991, Bangladesh's first since the restoration of democracy in 1990, when Ershad was in prison, the JP, which was thought to be hugely unpopular, surprised everyone by bagging 35 seats. The party's seats declined in the next election, but its popular support shot to a staggering 16.4, the JP's best performance in any democratic poll so far. In both the elections, the party walked the electoral path alone. In 2001, the party formed Islamic National Unity Front with some religion-based political parties, but that did not stop the erosion in JP votes across the country--the JP got only 14 seats this time (around 7 percent of the total votes cast). Even though the party's presence in the parliament bounced back to 27 in the last general election, his popular support is stuck at 7 percent, which is Jamaat's average vote in the last four polls that the latter has participated. What is alarming for the party is its reliance on Mohajote to get the 7 percent votes that it has received. In Dhaka and Chittagong Divisions, The JP might not have won seven seats without the support of Awami League. The prospect of getting reduced to less than 10 seats is huge in the fold of the JP, and the party leadership, might find it convenient to fight the next election– if and when there is one– under the comfort of an alliance with one of the major parties.

Ershad might have other plans up his sleeve. If the BNP does not agree to participate in the next election without a caretaker government, Ershad and JP might come handy. In a scenario like this, he will try to garner enough support to win 100 seats and become a formidable opposition; or to even pull a surprise. Then again, Ershad is a pragmatist. He knows that participating in a one-sided election might harm his political future, if it did not help the BNP in 1996, it will not help him in 20013. More so when the caretaker government issue is a popular one, and any attempt to tamper with people's mandate does not go down well with the electorate.

Ershad knows it well that his future lies in becoming a key ally of one of the two major parties. Now he is with the AL, but he might swing to the BNP, at any time, on any day. And he might even come back to the AL-led alliance after a few years with the BNP. He is Ershad, after all. ■

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