

Bangladesh

Period of democratic transition: 1990–1991

Pro-democracy civic movement: present

In Bangladesh, President Lieutenant General Hossain Mohammed Ershad seized power in a 1982 military coup and ruled under martial law until 1985. He subsequently won elections in 1986 and 1988 that were boycotted by major opposition parties. Under Ershad, all executive power was vested in the presidency; the unicameral National Parliament was a rubber-stamp institution dominated by Ershad's Jatiya Dal coalition party. The government directly controlled television and radio, and independent newspapers were censored.

A significant opposition movement persisted throughout Ershad rule, led by the influential Awami League and the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party, which both organized strikes and demonstrations on a regular basis. Nonetheless, divisions between the two groups hampered large-scale movements in the late 1980s. In early October 1990, however, the civic movement to oust Ershad was revived as both student groups and opposition parties united under a demand for the resignation of Ershad and the dismissal of Parliament. The movement attracted people from all spheres of life who began to defy a state-imposed curfew and organize mass strikes and demonstrations. Initially, protests were primarily student led, and violence between students and government forces led to several deaths. The demonstrations soon expanded, however, and 100,000 people participated in a march in Dhaka on December 4, leading to Ershad's resignation that day. Following Ershad's downfall, a transitional government quickly established democratic institutions. Free elections with candidates from over 100 parties were held in February 1991. Khaleda Zia was named Bangladesh's first female prime minister, and within months the country adopted a parliamentary system, ending 16 years of presidential rule.

Since 1991, Bangladesh has remained an electoral democracy, with elections held at least every five years. However, electoral violence remains a significant problem, and parliamentary boycotts have at times undermined the legislative process.