STOP EVERYTHING IN BANGLADESH: COMMUNICATION, MARTIAL LAW, AND NATIONAL STRIKES

Robert S. Anderson
Simon Fraser University

"Different quarters have requested me many a time to promulgate Martial Law. But we had unflinching faith in the political system and as a result did not pay heed to such requests."

Lieutenant-General H.M. Ershad
(June 1982, after imposing martial law)

"What the powerful want is assurance that their power is held rightfully"

Elizabeth Janeway
The Powers of the Weak, 1980

The political life of Bangladesh is punctuated by the imposition and withdrawal of martial law. Conversely, military rule is interrupted by party politics. My objectives are to show how, in this volatile context, government penetration into all aspects of Bangladesh's mass media is continuously and sometimes effectively counter-balanced by the populace, using communication strategies as political weapons. Although government penetration has been expanded under martial law, the popular communication responses have skillfully combined the mass media and traditional communication techniques in order to resist the government and to contest the unequal struggle. This paper deals first with how the electronic media are regarded by both sides, and how the print media are left to articulate the ambiguities of these confrontations. Second, it focusses on a national strike called a "hartal", in which the various interests in the country faced each other in a unique form of silent confrontation and which demonstrated the potency of the communication strategy of the populace. This particular hartal reveals a recurring pattern: popular response has been so inventive that martial law governments had to anticipate and accommodate to these national strikes or hartals. While martial law governments have been highly centralized, the popular response has been diverse and diffuse, offering a thousand points of resistance. What is interesting is how this asymmetry operates in communication terms for during the national strikes the government insisted on business as usual, while its opponents declared that, on the contrary, everything had stopped. The public consumption of these two views of history was primarily mediated by newspapers, radio, and television, but was enhanced by the lively oral contact which characterizes Bangladesh society.
Though there have been many martial law governments in Bangladesh, I will focus on the regime of General Ershad between 1982 and 1986. Bangladesh inherited a legacy of military dictatorships from the period before 1971 when the country was part of Pakistan. Between 1947 (independence from colonial control) and 1986, East Pakistan/Bangladesh was governed by martial law for 23 of the 40 years, that is 57.5% of the time (calculation based on Maniruzzaman, 1987, pp. 224-229). During 1971-1986 Bangladesh was under martial law for ten of the 15 years, 66% of the time. The first President of the newly created Bangladesh was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; in 1975 he was assassinated, and shortly afterward a coup put the martial law government of Lieutenant-General Ziaur Rahman in power. President Zia slowly "civilianized" his regime, allowing for limited political party freedom and transforming himself into a popular politician who headed the Bangladesh National Party until his own assassination in 1981. After Zia's assassination General H.M. Ershad led a bloodless coup, permitted civilian government for a few months, and imposed martial law again in 1982. Seeking to "civilianize" his regime from late 1984 onward, Ershad selectively lifted martial law, as a means of forcing his political opponents to contest an election against him while he still held out the threat of a return of complete military power. By this cunning process he too sought to become a popular politician. Indeed, he succeeded in forcing an election in May 1986, in which he was acclaimed as President; this was followed by a parliamentary election in November 1986 which saw Ershad's Janata party win two-thirds of the seats. Note that this paper does not analyze pressures from other countries and/or agencies like the World Bank. For reasons of space the focus here is on internal pressures but external pressures (or their absence) cannot be ignored.

Military, Media, and Social Control

It is curious that a population of 100 million, so given over to free speech, accepts and sometimes seems to desire a martial law which necessarily entails full control of communication. The Bengalis who form most of the population are known to all their neighbors as lovers of long conversations, romantic poetry, flamboyant rhetoric: they say they love to communicate. This is a popular image they have of themselves. The how is it that this huge number of people accept the rule of about 150,000 military and para-military men in uniform—men who value discipline and silence—when the rest of the population is disposed to form innumerable political parties, with noisy proliferating internal factions and elaborately competing ideologies? One seasoned Bangladeshi expert has concluded that:

...the Bangladeshi political character thus combines seemingly incompatible elements. Bangladeshis have an unexpressed desire for discipline, a great leader and great issues. Even so, they also relish opposing and belittling all types of leadership, raising storms over nuances of political issues and defying organizational discipline of any kinds. The first set of characteristics helps them to turn crises into national triumphs. The second set incapacitates them from working in an organized way to deal with the enormous social,
economic and political problems their country faces. This failure, in turn, perpetuates underdevelopment and stagnation and, if continued for long, could well erode all national self-confidence (Maniruzzaman, 1982, pp. 282-283).

These two strong tendencies, one toward open politics and communication and the other toward the closed system of martial law, are seldom balanced, often in contention. This contention is reflected in the media, and which, to some extent, the media make possible. Lieutenant-General Ershad presented himself in June 1982, shortly after imposing martial law, on the nation’s TV screens. In a "fire-side chat" in English with an interviewer, he discussed many aspects of the country’s problems and his plans to deal with them. Seated in his house, in civilian clothes, he answered the question "Why did the armed forces not take over the administration of the country earlier?" with "We did not like to do so. Different quarters have requested me many a time to promulgate Martial Law. But we had unflinching faith in the political system and as a result did not pay heed to such requests." The text of the entire interview was subsequently published in most newspapers in Dhaka (New Times, 1982). Not surprisingly, Ershad’s plan for the communications media was not discussed. What followed for four years was the rule of arms and the politics of exhortation, repeating the pattern after the 1975 coup (Anderson, 1976). The exhortation was supposed to overcome the disenchantment and apathy produced by the rule of arms. The population was exhorted to ‘put the nation first’, ‘produce more food’, and similar transcending ideals. As the years went by, more and more of the exhortation occurred in and through the media. Proof of this lies in the President’s renewed cultivation of the media in 1985 and 1986, during his attempt to force an election.

The properties of the various media are fully appreciated by the actors in the game. On one hand, there is the new, high-tech rigidity of state-owned television and radio with its capital-intensive electronic broadcasting monopoly. The martial law government controlled radio and TV broadcasting and government leaders understand their power which they use for their purposes. On the other hand the newspapers present an abundant variety of presses and owners. Whether state-owned or simply regulated by the state, newspapers are old technologies operating in a familiar competitive boom and bust business cycle. Consequently control of the press is less complete than control of broadcasting. Each government under a political party has sought to regulate and influence the press, but martial law governments seek to control and censor it more thoroughly. After all, martial law regulations provide severe penalties or imprisonment for anyone who criticizes the imposition, operation, or continuance of martial law, including spreading (by any means) "any prejudicial report which might create fear or alarm". Editorial comment on the government’s performance is permitted if it is supportive, if it politely points out unfinished business, or if it criticizes the government’s perceived enemies. But comment on the military nature of government is forbidden.
Government Influence in the Media

Even where literacy is low and people are poor, as in Bangladesh, the martial law administrators need the media's co-operation: after all, what is important is not how many read, but who is actually reading, because of the great power of city and town elites. People in the media professions have their own objectives too: to improve the standards of performance and to further their own careers. They also worked to promote national development programs such as growing more food or limiting the population. Finally, in order to decrease their vulnerability when there are dramatic swings in the political climate, media personnel try to develop some autonomy from the government by cultivating a popular base, or developing an additional outside income in advertising, films, theatre and consulting (Lent, 1984).

During the four year period of Ershad's military rule, the media-government relation remained fundamentally volatile because the media necessarily reflected the persistence of a complex set of political oppositions to that rule. Government influence was matched by the media's own appetite for influence. With so little economic independence, large parts of the media remained particularly vulnerable under martial law. President Ershad was also vulnerable because he is reported to have feared media accounts of his relations with a former mistress. He was also criticized because he remained in the Pakistan Army in 1971 and did nothing to bring about the emergence of Bangladesh: his loyalties to family and country were suspect. Although he may have tried to delay or soften these accounts, in the end they were put in circulation: what political effect they had among people who knew nothing before their publication is not known, but his opponents hoped that this news would further discredit him.

After the coup, a civilian, not a military, Minister of Information and Broadcasting was appointed in direct control of government-owned newspapers, including those operated by the Government's Trust, as well as Bangladesh Television, Radio Bangladesh, the Mass Media Department, the Film and Publication Department, the government-owned news agency (BSS), and the Film Development Corporation. The government's numerous forms of regulation and influence were carried out through the Ministry's Joint Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries. Direct controls included oversight for censorship (at the beginning of Ershad's regime a military officer watched the preparation of TV news reports); threats of legal cases aimed at publishers which might lead to imprisonment; and outright seizure of a newspaper. There were equally powerful indirect influences, such as withholding government advertising; delaying, reducing, or withholding newsprint import quota permits; delaying foreign exchange permits for purchase of equipment parts and repairs; interfering in the rental of working space; pursuit of costly and damaging criminal allegations aimed at key individuals and their taxes, loans, etc.; transfer of government journalists away from central media offices to work for the less-prestigious government information services in outlying towns. Finally, the government could offer the reward—sometimes for self-censorship—of appointments as ambassadors and press attaches in Bangladesh.
embassies abroad; to travel to cover foreign sports events like the Olympics, and to accompany the President’s entourage overseas to the United Nations, or the Commonwealth Summit meetings.

In 1972 after the war the government was more or less forced into ownership of newspapers because many of them were the abandoned property of Pakistanis. Since then it has steadily divested itself: the Daily Observer was returned to its original owners; and the Times, Dainik Bangla and Bichitra were transferred to a Board of Trustees established by the government. The extent of potential government influence over all print media, however, continues to be virtually total—whether it occurs under martial law or not, through a trust or not.

Under former President Zia private ownership of the media began to flourish. Since Ershad brought an even stronger conviction that the private sector was to be the engine of growth and prosperity, he did not interfere with the transfer of the influential Bangladesh Observer to its original owner Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, nor with the return to Sheikh Mujib’s relatives of the Bangladesh Times, seized under the martial law in 1975. The Observer and the Times now dominate the English press. However Ershad, in a show of strength upheld the imprisonment of the popular editor of Naya Pratidhani, arrested in 1982 for criticizing the secret trials and executions of military officers implicated in former President Zia’s assassination (Lent, 1984, p. 21). The editor of the now outlawed BNP political party newspaper Dainik Desh was imprisoned, and the newspapers Khabar and Sonar Bangla were closed down after Ershad imposed martial law. Just before the two-day hartal in 1984 described below the BNP paper Dainik Desh was again banned by the government, putting 54 journalists, 83 press workers, and 64 administrative workers out of their jobs (Bichitra, 7 December 1984). Thus the two tendencies within the military were satisfied—censorship for some quarters, encouragement of the private press for others.

In 1986, there were 56 registered newspapers with a total circulation of 583,000, in a country with a total population of 100 million. This is a 12% increase over total circulation of 521,000 in 1982 (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 1982; Far Eastern Economic Review, 18 September 1986). A high-level Press Commission proposed structural remedies to the government in 1984, but few changes were implemented. Journalists went on strike more than once in the next two years in the hope of bringing attention to their conditions and the need to implement the Commission’s recommendations. Ershad invited publishers to meet him in May 1986, at the time of his election, to discuss the state of the press, but the Minister of Information concluded the meeting was a failure—"soon they all were quarrelling among themselves," he said (Far Eastern Economic Review, 18 September 1986). Ershad’s objective was clear; despite full government power and control of electronic media, he needed a vigorous press to carry out his objectives, many of which (e.g., family planning) could not be achieved by coercion alone.
In 1986, at the time of transition from martial law to martial democracy the government reached daily audiences of four million people through about 400,000 television sets. The Bangladesh Broadcasting Authority said that its TV monopoly was finally profitable: earnings in 1985-86 were Tk 140 million (45% from licensing fees, 55% from advertising), and expenses Tk 90 million (profit approx. $1.6 million US) (Far Eastern Economic Review, 18 September 1986). The TV station was always heavily guarded because it had been the target of previous military and civilian attacks. In May 1986, during the election period, opposition politicians were offered prime-time on TV to explain their party’s objectives—otherwise television news content is strictly controlled. To comprehend the relatively insignificant status of television in Bangladesh one has to realize that a university assistant professor, government deputy-secretary, or bank branch-manager would have had to pay, in 1984-86, all their salary for six months (Tk 15,000) for a colour television set and three months (Tk 7,500) for a black-and-white set. These sets were assembled in two Dutch and Japanese factories in Bangladesh. In comparison a good quality radio with shortwave capacity would take 30% of one month’s wages (Tk 800) at the same salary, and a month’s subscription to a daily newspaper only 2%.

Bangladesh Radio is also controlled by the same Broadcasting Authority but unlike television, was reported to be losing money: Tk 120 million in 1986 for expenses and Tk 32.5 million income from advertising and licensing earnings. Nevertheless radio’s audience is enormous—30 or 40 million people listen daily—which includes many who can’t read and/or who will never have electricity (let alone a TV set). But, during the hartal this same huge audience also listened to All-India Radio, Radio Moscow, the BBC, the Voice of America, Radio Australia, Radio Beijing, etc.—not just for music, but for news. Despite these alternate foreign sources (or perhaps also because of them), there was no challenge from within the country to the government’s dominance in radio.

Unofficial or pirate-radio broadcasts were used once, during the popular opposition to the Pakistan Army during 1971, and appear to have been important to the conduct of the guerilla-style combat waged by the Bangladeshis.

Both (the Chittagong and Dhaka private broadcasting stations) became the first targets of the Pak army counter-attack. During the liberation war the radio was the primary medium of contact between the struggle and the captive population within Bangladesh....This historic phase probably did more to expose the masses to the radio as a mass medium than any other event (Sobhan, 1977, p. 151).

It is believed that this widely available technology has not, however, been used in or near Bangladesh by opponents of any government since 1971.

The press in Bangladesh was thus in a condition quite similar to that described for Britain in the 19th century in the Introduction to this issue: as the costs of
production and distribution rose, and as competition for elite audiences increased on a national basis, the smaller papers supported by a special constituency weakened. Analogous to the pressures on the British ‘radical press’ described by Curran, these papers in Bangladesh experienced the extra blow of having the political party which supported them banned by martial law. Those papers not party-supported but which spoke to an ideological constituency could easily be further weakened by the withdrawal of advertising, because in Bangladesh papers cannot afford to charge the purchaser for the cost of production. Government and corporate advertising could ensure a paper’s transition into the bigger market, a market where (under martial law) all ideological discourse (except one) was to be avoided. Government could tell corporations which papers to advertise in. The strong pressures for self-censorship can thus be understood. But add to this—quite different from Britain in the nineteenth century—the government’s profitable monopoly on broadcasting. Given that the middle and upper classes are very social and spend a great deal of time in one another’s houses, watching television allowed them to while away the hours in conspicuous consumption. The imposition of curfew added to this sedentary way of life. Television was even more popular in the hartal—not for news but for entertainment. The profit from this monopoly further weakened the economy of the newspapers.

But beyond the mass media, away from the cities, the intensity and intricacy of oral communication and personal influence in Bangladesh are legendary. Story-tellers, raconteurs and singers circulate among the enormous non-literate population. At the weekly market there is an intense exchange of political information as well as goods, services, and money. Travelling theatre companies treat current politics through deceptively "historic" themes (like kings with too much power). Gatherings at Saint’s tombs or festivals provide a similar opportunity for discussing of the economy and politics. Every bus and ferry is a slowly moving seminar in the loud and open expression of opinion—everyone can overhear, and anyone can join in. The tea shops surrounding every law court have a similar function. Information can move at 30 miles per hour, so there should be no presumption that control of the mass media or of the airlines, railways or telephone system would paralyze the flow of popularly articulated opinions or information throughout the country. It is this prolific and versatile character of communication that both martial law and its various oppositions have to address in their strategies. This becomes clearer in the following detailed description of one major confrontation in December 1984.

**Background of the Hartal**

Because, according to Bangladeshis, a hartal is different from a strike, the term hartal is used here: it means a period of non-cooperation and non-participation and does not presume active civil disobedience or violence. Because it is a technique of indirect, passive confrontation with governments, however, it dares the military to overreact and so the hartal has been the occasion of sporadic violence between troops and crowds. Schools, shops, banks, and businesses all close. Telephones, water supply,
electrical systems have so far been left functioning. Transport and communication are the issues of contention—whether they will or won’t operate is part of the game. The importance of the term hartal, and the technique, is its totality—its intention is total withdrawal and total denial. Thus, says Bondurant, forcing the opponent to make a choice, like any ‘well-launched demonstration’ (Bondurant, 1971, p. 82).

In spite of its capacities for control, from 1984 onward the martial law government was edging toward accommodating the press and allowing political parties and politicians to organize more freely. Each of these elements was prominently displayed in the dramatic national strike—a two-day hartal—in late December 1984. This hartal, like others which followed, became the theatre for interplay between military and political leaders, the armed forces, the police, state broadcast media, the printed press, opposition political parties, students, labour unions, and unorganized people. It became a crucial test of the limits imposed by martial law, the culmination of ten months of mounting pressure which could have resulted in a coup against Ershad or the termination of martial law through elections.

Ershad was being tested by a heterogeneous set of political opponents who insisted that he hold elections soon, elections in which he himself would not be a contestant. Parties opposing him were grouped in alliances led by two women, one a widow and the other a niece of assassinated Presidents. Apparently intending to undermine plans for the two-day hartal, President Ershad presented a package of compromises including a promise to hold elections within four months. The opposition did not react to this package. But while apparently willing to hold elections, Ershad said nothing about stepping aside: in fact he seemed to be planning to participate personally in elections. Would the party which formed around him disband, as the opposition demanded? This interplay, this theatre, was more than an entertaining game. The hartal framed and focussed the public’s attention in an extraordinarily powerful fashion, and illuminated the malleability of the roles of the media under martial law.

1984 became a difficult year for Ershad’s government. There seems to have been disagreement at senior levels in the military as to whether elections should be held, but at the same time a gradual relaxation of military controls in news production and distribution. This produced curious advances and retreats on the part of the government. These two processes led the opposition parties to press harder for elections and demand media coverage for their own activities. Starting on 21 February 1984, a day of annual nationalist commemoration of the Bangla language, opposition politicians continuously tested the limits of martial law. For days afterward the familiar pattern of political meetings and demonstrations followed, and the predictable military response occurred. Since greater power was on the government’s side, accusations of excessive use of force were levelled at both the police and military. Photographs of these confrontations featured in the influential magazine Bichitra. The deaths and injuries of civilians in February and March, at the hands of the police, are believed to
have had some effect on the unorganized public's attitude that this martial law regime was no longer impartial. (Bichitra, 7 December 1984).

In August 1984, all newspapers, government-owned and privately-owned, closed down entirely because press workers went on a strike. Members of the same union, they were all demanding job-related issues be settled by implementation of the long-standing Commission of Enquiry into conditions for journalists. During this month of strikes, government-owned radio and TV became the only domestic source of official news: since they carried little reportage about political activity, much was left to the public's imagination regarding the plans of opposition political parties. These parties were meanwhile quite busy. On 1 November an eight-hour hartal was successfully organized and five weeks later everything in the country was stopped for 24 hours. During this hartal eight press photographers working for various Dhaka daily newspapers (including a government-owned one) were beaten by police while they photographed a confrontation near the central mosque of Dhaka University. There was also an attack by unnamed persons on the home of a prominent TV interviewer and cultural organizer who was known to be allied with Ershad and his political party. Moreover there were numerous attacks on the houses of leaders of opposition parties: although the police and army are reported to have been surprised by these attacks, in that they were without recent precedent, these attacks served to limit the recruitment of new members to the active opposition.

The original idea for the two-day hartal was attributed to the Workers League (SKOP) which demanded that the government fully implement an "accord" which was reached six months earlier. The opposition parties announced they would support the hartal, but did not make a show of campaigning for it. The government's response was that the financial aspects of the accord had already been implemented (Ershad said worker's wages had been doubled) while SKOP countered that legitimacy of unions provided in the accord had not been realized. But granting legal rights to unions, said the private sector Bangladesh Employers Association, would cripple the country's economic growth. Having decided that the satisfaction of employers would be more valuable than popularity with the organized workers, the government took the Employer Association's position and did not implement the full accord. While this does not mean an equivalence of interests between the private sector and the military government, their positions were mutually reinforced in opposition to the hartal.

However, the foregoing story was not the explanation of the hartal that most people gave. It was more commonly seen as an acute test of Ershad's nerve and control. If provoked would he and the military over-react? It seemed to be a game where the players hold their breath. During an eight-hour hartal the previous month, a labour leader and a 13-year-old boy were killed in separate incidents. Most opposition leaders were arrested during that shorter hartal, and later released. What would happen this time? It would be difficult to play this game without the mass media. The inherent differences between the newspapers, radio, and television, and their distinct relations
with their audiences played an important role in the hartal, but each was part of the hartal. Not just their technical capability but also their relation to the present government influenced how each treated this episode, and how the government and people would approach each of media in future confrontations.

Saturday in Bangladesh is like Sunday in most other countries. People were working hard to get ready for the hartal: both the army and the housewives had to seize Friday to plan, because up until the evening before there were rumours that a compromise might be reached between the government and opposition. Perhaps, thought some, it would all be called off. But on Friday positions were hardened. "No wheel will turn," the opposition said in the morning newspapers. In reply the government put on the nation's afternoon TV screens the text of a martial law order that all public transport buses, ferries, airlines, etc. would operate, and that officials would be in their government offices during the next two days. The turning of wheels was officially defined as business as usual (Bangladesh Times, 18 December 1984). Ershad himself, out of uniform, went to the influential Faridabad mosque for the Friday noon prayer, and gave a speech (shown on the evening TV news) on the virtues of brotherhood and unity and its significance for the nation's progress. Permission had also been given to a fundamentalist Muslim politician to hold, at the same time as the noon prayer, a huge rally in front of the unused parliament buildings. Thousands were bussed to the very spot where a week before Ershad (despite the fact that he had not personally participated in the freedom struggle) had reviewed the troops on the 13th anniversary of the surrender of the Pakistan army and the birth of the country. Pious-looking young men in fashionable middle eastern dress ran through the streets waving religious flags, chanting phrases from the Koran.

The Hartal Begins

At sundown the real preparations began. Housewives went to the bazaars in droves, in anticipation of two days of closure. Food sellers and hawkers were ready for them with much greater volumes and much higher prices. There were long line-ups of vehicles at the petrol pumps because refinery workers were expected to join the hartal and thus there would be no delivery for three or four days. At the edges of the main roads and other strategic spots in Dhaka, the army moved silently into place with trucks and tents at dusk. On the dark and fractious university campus, students began their meetings which would soon be interrupted by noisy small bombs and assaults by opposing students. Government officials were moving to inexpensive hotels near their offices, so they could conform to the government order, walk to work but not get into a vehicle to travel, and therefore partially observe the hartal. By midnight Friday nothing was moving.

At sunrise on Saturday December 22 people setting out for customary brisk walks in the suburbs of Dhaka were impressed by the silence. A huge city, with a population of six million people, was becoming a village. Everyone commented on it. A
little later in the morning, away from the main roads, some small shops quietly opened, construction workers dug foundations for a public school, and barbers snipped hair. "Hey observe the hartal," someone called at a young boy on a bicycle, but no one stopped him. In foreign-populated Gulshan a couple of cars drove on the side roads, but foreigners were supposed to be aware of the risk of having a brick tossed through the windshield if they drove during a hartal. Some young men in other parts of the city took this opportunity to abuse foreigners verbally, calling loudly at them with uncharacteristic rudeness, in Bangla and English. The antinomian atmosphere was particularly charged at key points such as the Farm Gate, where hundreds of young men strolled about and gawked at the soldiers. Observers said that instructions from the opposition parties forbade provocation of the military, but these alleged instructions were not made public. That would have undermined the game, and such party instructions would not control all young men anyway. At one point three were seized, arrested, and whisked off within five minutes because an officer thought offensive, provocative remarks had been made to the police. A large procession in support of the hartal was formed near the New Market, but it was broken up by the police and army with tear gas (Bichitra, 28 December 1984).

By noon, before the call to prayer, women were strolling and kids were playing ball on streets usually packed with rickshaws. When prayers were over, however, the skies opened up to the thump of Air Force (U.S.) helicopters and the snarl of MiG fighters (practicing low above the city), communicating the message of power. This occurred while Ershad had lunch and rest. He had a very busy morning going to government offices and factories to see how they were operating, all of it dutifully recorded for the evening television news. Even the representations of business-as-usual changed during the hartal. For example, viewers later said the televised events were staged because the bureaucrats sat and worked while the President moved around, whereas normally they stop and stand at attention.

Sitting on a roof, one could see the same pattern all afternoon—little spotter planes flying circuits across the city followed three minutes later by big helicopter gun ships, running around at the cost of $800 US per hour. But it turned out the real confrontation was occurring somewhere else. In the northern district capital of Rajshahi a crowd was trying to barricade the scheduled departure of a train. A magistrate bringing an order to disperse was surrounded by the crowd; tear gas was used by the police to clear the crowd. Shots were fired by the police which left a hawker and a student dead in their tracks. Ershad decided then to order students to vacate university residences on all campuses by Sunday morning; these residences are sources of continuous and occasionally violent opposition to the government, and custom once inhibited the police and army from penetrating the campuses too far. Under martial law, however, this custom was disregarded. Would the students move out with the bodies of martyrs killed in Rajshahi in their custody?
That Saturday evening the state-controlled TV news revealed none of this. A week earlier student groups had threatened to seize the broadcasting facilities because of the handling of the TV news. But no trace of the hartal appeared on the screen this evening; no mention was made of the 555 arrests made today, in Dhaka alone. Instead viewers saw lengthy footage of a couple of rickshaws rolling self-consciously on the streets, of ferry boats at wharves, busy offices, and humming factories. There were shots of Ershad amidst the typewriters, and his military deputies looking at fertilizer production—all screened with little comment. These shots could have been taken the day before. With all meetings banned by the edict of the day before, no opposition voices spoke; for them, the evident successes of the hartal had already contradicted the government’s claim of peace and business-as-usual. When the news was over, people stopped laughing and sat back to watch an old American sit-com. The radio reverted to popular songs.

A Second Day

Sunday, 23 December opened with the BBC and Radio Australia news at 5 a.m. announcing shootings and arrests, and with the Voice of America saying opposition leaders were determined to continue the hartal today. Neither radio Moscow nor Radio Peking mentioned Bangladesh. All-India Radio described thehartal in measured terms, pointing out it would last two days. Surprisingly one found both sides of yesterday’s story in The Bangladesh Observer: the Rajshahi confrontation, the deaths, the arrests, as well as the government’s announcement of "situation peaceful". This paper used a circumlocutious method to deal with Ershad’s offer of an election: in a front page story that day on the police tear-gassing of opponents to General Zia Pakistan, "it may be mentioned," the paper said, that Ershad had been the first to send congratulations to Zia following his questionable referendum victory as President in Pakistan two days earlier, while few other national leaders had done so. This suggested that a similar phoney referendum victory was all that Ershad could expect.

After breakfast on Sunday there was more activity on the streets. The spotter planes were up early. Trucks occasionally raced along the main roads. One convoy of civilian cars careened behind an ambulance full of policemen, its sirens blaring. Students lingering too long at campus residences were removed by force. And a few rickshaws were braving the streets alone: jesters declared that the opposition ran out of money to pay them not to operate (there are thousands of rickshaws in the capital), while others said perhaps the government paid them more to operate today than the opposition did to stop them yesterday. Some trains actually left the railway station. But there were opponents of this looser atmosphere who said the hartal’s objective was getting lost. Thus two government buses were attacked with small bombs, two rickshaws were smashed up in old Dhaka by angry groups, and an open shop was damaged, its owner roughed up. Some old scores were being settled under the antinomian atmosphere, setting examples of discipline for the future. In the media these attackers were called "miscreants," an old and oft-used British colonial term coming
from the archaic French "one who does not believe". Again the television cameras rolled to record everything that moved, but missed Sunday's 217 arrests in Dhaka. Charged with "picketing and provoking members of law enforcement agencies", these people were sent to crowded holding areas or, if beaten and injured, to hospital wards.

In outlying areas, where 85% of the population lives, the hartal was even more complete. The army was on full-alert in each of the 68 district towns (Bichitra, 28 December 1984). The government put less energy there into trying to achieve and report normalcy in the district towns at least for radio and television. So in district capitals, because there was no attempt at business as usual, there were no significant media reports. The role of TV is important among the elite in district towns and of course in other big cities like Chittagong and Khulna. Although there are independent newspapers in other cities and district towns, Dhaka newspapers (in Bangla and English) are read within a day of publication in virtually every village in the country. The news on national radio is treated with caution, and villagers certainly listen consistently to short wave broadcasts in Bangla from foreign agencies. Despite different conditions in outlying towns and cities, arrests occurred there too. Martial law is geared to the quick disposal of cases, so these people would not necessarily languish without trial. Those among them who would work for opposition parties if an election was held were often held on spurious charges.

At noon on Sunday the MiG fighters cruised around again, drowning out the muezzein's call to prayer. The streets were warm and lazy, as salaried people declared an extra holiday and strolled to friends' houses. Those living on daily wages—like carpenters' groups waiting on street corners to be hired—said they were suffering from the hartal. Little attention was paid to the helicopters overhead, though high tension prevailed at strategic spots where crowds confronted military and police. Elsewhere, however, the troops and police seemed determined to appear relaxed, and in some quieter places sat down at the edge of the road when not on patrol. Sophisticated imported communication technologies allowed them to move quickly into action while maintaining an unobtrusive profile in the shade. To some people Sunday afternoon provided a sense of relief that major confrontations had not occurred, but in other more political quarters this quietude was disappointing. The gradual relaxation showed that the long hartal was not universally popular; people were glad the tension had lifted.

On Sunday evening the TV news footage of normalcy and peacefulness was backed up by lengthy treatment of an afternoon Cabinet meeting chaired by Ershad. New policies on shrimp culture were announced, but no official reference was made to the second day of the hartal. Long lingering shots of a train, a few rickshaws, two aircraft taking off, and government office workers were televised, again with relatively little comment. By the evening it was almost over. People travelled by rickshaws and a few cars were out. Larger shops, such as pharmacies, opened for brisk business.
Public Perceptions

On the following Monday morning the newspapers ran stories in which opposition parties announced they would hold special prayer meetings for the two people killed at Rajshahi. The hartal was declared a success by the opposition, and little was mentioned about the arrests. There were line-ups outside banks; when they had closed at noon on the previous Thursday, three and a half days without transactions heightened rumours of devaluation of the taka. Here was a perfect opportunity, some thought, to plan and execute a devaluation and avoid a rush at the banks. But no devaluation occurred; plainly the President was looking for legitimacy and would not back unpopular policies like devaluation if they occurred during a hartal.

The day's conversations revolved around whether the experience was really of any use to the opposition—they had expanded the hartals up from four-hour to eight-hour to a two-day affair—and whether it made an impact upon Ershad. "He has no popular support," said a senior advisor to successive government administrations, "but until now he himself has not acknowledged it. Others have told him. But he avoids seeing the facts. Did he get the full message this time?" Popular analysis in English and Bangla included the customary resort to tribal arguments: "As a people we are basically anti- Establishment" and "I tell you we Bengalis need a very strong man to run this country properly". Some of the arguments were reminiscent of national hartals more than ten years before, in President Sheikh Mujib's time; this is a classic discourse because under Pakistan and Bangladesh these same people have survived numerous martial law administrations. (Jahan, 1980; Ahamed, 1980; Hyman, 1983).

It mattered little whom one asked for explanations: rickshawallahs and businessmen alike, housewives, scientists and cooks—whether committed or indifferent to "politics"—said that the occurrence of this major hartal proved that the present government enjoyed no deep popularity, and that the government apparatus worked for Ershad only under duress. Some insisted that one should not conclude the hartal was popular either; afraid of repraisal, almost everyone conformed. Their intuition was not far from expert analysis, such as that of Maniruzzaman's view (1987, p. 108) that:

...a military regime that does not seem to have the support of any of the major civilian groups continues to hold power in Bangladesh (1982-1986), only because of active competition between the two major political parties -- the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party. If the leaders of these leading political parties could moderate their extreme partisanship and enter into a national compact...the 'iron will' of the present Bangladesh junta would quickly wilt, and the civilian political process would soon revive.

And who, asked "non-political" people, are the opposition? Have we not seen them all before? Is there a new idea or great leader among them? We do want something to happen, they said, because in our present situation we are simply stuck. No political evolution is taking place. People wanted Ershad to admit to himself what
everyone else knew. Would he neutralize himself and hold an election, withdrawing more or less gracefully? Or would he engineer a referendum with himself at the centre, "win", and carry on like General Zia in Pakistan? Here is the dead centre of politics in Bangladesh.

The denouement of this story is stunning in its speed. On 16 January 1985, three weeks after this hartal, most functions of martial law were dissolved. Its special courts ceased to function, and the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court was restored. Saying he had "restored fundamental rights," General Ershad asked the Chief Election Commissioner to prepare plans for an April election. The Bangladesh Times described Ershad's expectation expressed at a news conference thus:

...he firmly looked forward to co-operation from national mass media like radio, television, newspapers and movies. He said that the role of the media was especially helpful in the discharge of the responsibilities vested in him.

In its editorial the following day (17 January 1985), the Times optimistically announced:

Judged by the general standards of Third World politics, where Martial Law rule is a common phenomenon, the situation is unique....A peaceful transition to democracy should not be a difficult task now.

Announcing that GDP was up by 4.5%, that agricultural production was up 4.7% over the preceding year, and that there was a healthy balance of payments surplus, Ershad threw himself into campaigning against the two women who led the opposition party coalitions. Seven weeks later when nomination papers were to be filed, however, these same leaders decided to boycott the elections. Swiftly the military reacted: the national elections were cancelled and martial law fully reinstated. As if calling the bluff of the opposition, Ershad closed the universities indefinitely, put the political opposition leaders under house arrest and outlawed all political parties. During the six weeks in which martial law was dissolved and party politics allowed, moreover, he is reported to have complained "public life has become miserable."

Instead of an election Ershad then held a quick referendum on his policies and leadership: those few who voted did so very supportively, and he said his mandate was renewed. The demand in the military for total control appeared to have won. In order to extend his influence beyond the cities, Ershad permitted rural "county"-level (thana) elections in which political parties had to act in disguise, the way political parties do in many civic elections in Canada. He offered the press its continued measure of independence. But this has often happened before.

Throughout the rest of 1985 Ershad attempted to draw the opposition parties into an election, and tried to amplify the differences between the Awami League alliance and the BNP alliance. There were more hartals along the way, including a major one shortly before the May 1986 election. This hartal was intended to stall the election,
but failed. One opposition party alliance contested the election, the other did not. Martial law was finally dissolved, and by September 1986 Ershad had retired from active military service. However, because he was President, Ershad remained chief of the armed forces, and chief martial law administrator. With control of the reactivated parliament in 1986, Ershad's party was seeking passage of an indemnity bill which would legalize all the actions of the martial law regime between 1982 and 1986. Thus during 1986 we see the creation of what was called a "martial democracy", through which a new ruling group claimed a retrospective legitimacy. During 1987 and 1988 the opposition organized more national strikes; yet despite their intention to topple the government and despite the accompanying repression, Ershad remained in power.

**Conclusions**

The evidence offered here shows that people who have lived under martial law for many years, who are said to be incapable of working co-operatively in an organized way and to have a desire for imposed discipline, can nevertheless sustain a major national "strike" or hartal. It also shows this was achieved without access to television or radio, even pirate broadcasting. The telephone system is used by few persons, was not confidential, and was subject to failures. Newspapers and magazines, despite low literacy rates, were an important source of news about the hartal but those too were slow, and subject to censorship, closure or confiscation. But limits on the use of mass media were easily overcome by alternate means of communication.

In the hartal native genius evolved a powerful form of communication long before martial law. A message is delivered from the powerless to the powerful by doing nothing: it is a play upon action and inaction, a show of passive resistance in the face of the active rule of arms. This communication through the hartal evolved intimately with the broadcast media and the press, without which an event of this scale would be difficult to organize. But even if the government were to seize and shut the media down entirely, the hartal could still occur: it was not staged for the media, and was not a "media-event". A message can move across Bangladesh within twenty-four hours without modern media because information passes so rapidly by word of mouth. The hartal is itself a medium of communication. It is a display of the powers of the weak. But by their treatment of the hartal, their confirmation that it succeeded here or failed there, the media used this big hartal in 1984 as an instrument by which to gauge their own proximity to and/or autonomy from martial law. Various publics extended their own restricted experience of geography and politics to a conception of the whole country, by relying on their interpretation of the media treatment of the hartal. In this circular way, the hartal and its media treatment were crucial influences upon political changes within the country, with the hartal creating a theatre for a dialogue under martial law between two forms of power—arms and public opinion. The pattern has been repeated in subsequent major hartals, constantly testing the reaction of the military leaders.
Throughout Bengal a game (kabbaddi) is played in which players on opposing sides must hold their breath: alternately cunning, force and speed, are required to overcome one's opponents. Holding one's breath sets a time limit on any episode in the game. Episodes like this hartal were played while the Bangladeshis held their breath. They also had a sense of deja vu, having played the game before. And yet a time limit was imposed upon this episode also—two days. Each hartal is the same. Long enough to stop everything and prove a point, short enough to keep people's attention on the game. Divisions within the military government, a temporary consensus among politicians, and a willingness to experiment among the public were met with special determination on the part of the media. Although some people expected the end of martial law as a result of one hartal or another, they were supported in this idea only for a few weeks only. The pressures of food shortages, economic problems and population growth were unrelenting. These moments in history came again, and again. They are, after all, cumulative—each moment pressed its weight upon the popular consciousness, sending a message for change.

In the complex relation of the communication media to the martial law, people's expectations for this government were communicated, in part, through the media, where most of their concomitant disappointments were displayed. Although the reach of the press, radio, and TV is limited, these conflicting states of feeling were clearly communicated to the rulers. Evidence suggests that TV is considered a hot medium, requiring total government control. Newspapers seemed to be considered a cooler medium capable of self-discipline (or self-censorship) and therefore not worth the effort of total control. That newspapers and magazines are not prevented from dealing with news which TV and radio avoid is not due to military indifference to the consequences of an uncontrolled press. The real reason for this degree of freedom lay in the fact that the martial law administration had also to govern against rumour and thus needed a credible form of expression in the written press. Those in the military and Cabinet who advocated for total control have not always overcome those who argued for a minimal management of opponents. Total control takes so much disciplined effort: minimal management is so much easier. Like previous governments before his, Ershad's regime has many other complex economic development problems to face in addition to its relationship to the mass media.

This martial law government, like others which achieved power by coup or by force, had a special need to transform its legitimation crisis into an advantage. Even with enormous power this government subjected itself to the test of the hartal, because to acquire legitimacy and retain control it had to undergo a test of strength; to tolerate the hartal, as it tolerated the existence of political parties. As has each previous government in Bangladesh, Ershad's government relied on foreign aid for most of its development budget, new investment, and some recurrent costs. This tolerance, at times 'repressive tolerance', arose because the military's enormous power was still insufficient to govern the country effectively. It had to rely on an educated and compliant civil service. In this context it may appear necessary to tolerate a certain "freedom of
the press" (by local definitions) not only because it is a sign of "legitimate" government (a value in itself) but also because this freedom constitutes a tactical advantage to the government. After all, as President Ershad said, the media was especially helpful in the discharge of responsibilities vested in him. The rule of arms and the politics of exhortation thus remains the central fact of communication.

End Notes

1. This prohibition excludes an important sector of the economy from discussion. Although the reported size of the military/paramilitary forces fluctuates slightly, (159,000 in 1984, 146,000 in 1986), the military budget has climbed steadily. In 1984 military expenditures were 18.48% of all public expenditure, and 19.83% in 1985 according to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, compared to 11.9% for China, 21.5% for India, and 26.0% for Pakistan (Far Eastern Economic Review, Asia 1987 Yearbook, December 1987). Estimated expenditure in 1984-85 was $273.36 million US, and given the nature of the military-industrial capability in the country much of this expenditure was in foreign exchange outside the country. Nevertheless the military had significant economic relations with the rest of the country, although these were largely unstudied.

2. The pro-business, pro-western daily Ittefaq had the largest circulation (200,000), the weekly Jayjaydin was the largest magazine (100,000), and the political weeklies Bichitra (40,000) the most influential in Bangla and Holiday the most influential in English. Note that Ittefaq would be read by, or read to, or talked about, among at least five times as many people as the 200,000 named in circulation audits. The government-run news agency BSS was the sole distributor of foreign news within Bangladesh (Reuters, Xinhua, Press Trust of India, AFP, etc.) and its tiny budget was made up of a government grant, obligatory subscriptions from the country’s newspapers, and fees for distribution. Foreign reporters visited or worked in Bangladesh under government supervision and if they annoy the government they are expelled.

3. Widely used during the Indian and Pakistan independence movements, including by Gandhi, a major hartal occurred in Bengal when Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal into East and West in 1905. Hartal is not a Bangla word, but a compound term from "haar" (which in Sanskrit means market) and "tal" (from tala meaning lock) borrowed from Hindi. A green banner called a "harital" was apparently used in the Mughal period to signify the closure of a market for any special purpose -- not necessarily signifying a protest. The hartal developed in conjunction with the 19th century innovation the industrial strike which began in India, in the railways, textile and jute mills. The hartal also drew on older traditions of agrarian protest which acquired special significance under the colonial administration because of fear that protest in one area could be communicated orally to other areas, fuelling a general uprising. (On agrarian protests in east Bengal, see Bose, 1986). I am
grateful to Peter Harnetty, Hari Sharma, and John Wood for discussion of this point. By 1900 the hartal had acquired the exclusive meaning of protest and resistance which included the business class.

4. Why Bichitra is not banned is intriguing. Allied to the high circulation daily Dainik Bangla (both owned by the government's arm's-length Trust), Bichitra's workers are all government employees in a technical sense. Its circulation grew from 36,000 in 1982 to 40,000 in 1986, and is one of the few government publications which is profitable. "Hot" news takes a week to appear in Bichitra, by which time it has "cooled off" slightly. Nevertheless the magazine has maintained a tradition of critical writing throughout Bangladesh's history and is also a major vehicle for poets and fiction writers. Its profitability and stature has probably outweighed its nuisance value.

REFERENCES


Bangladesh Times, 18 December 1984, "Text of President's Radio and TV Address".

Bichitra, 16 March 1984.

Bichitra, 7 December 1984, "Hartal, Non-Cooperation and Then What?" (trans.).

Bichitra, 28 December 1984, "Hartal, What Then?" (trans.).


