

Bangladesh: Where do we go from here?

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Rehman Sobhan examines the implications for the country of Prof. Yunus's decision to retreat from the political stage.

The precipitate withdrawal by Prof. Muhammad Yunus from the political arena was an unexpected as was his announcement of launching a party. The emphasis is on the word precipitate since neither decision was necessarily surprising. His decision to enter politics originated in a generally felt need for an alternative to the political duopoly which had contributed to Bangladesh's malfunctioning democracy. His withdrawal originated in his disappointment at the failure of members of civil and political society to immediately join him on his political platform.

Had Yunus launched his foray into politics with more caution and planning he would not have had to depend on such instantaneous responses to his initiative. If he was seeking to bring in a new constituency of activists from civil society to join him in politics, he should have been aware that this class would react with caution. Most of them are not professional politicians, they have livelihoods, organizations to run, family responsibilities and expectations for the future. It is no accident that they have sat on the side-lines of politics for so long, limiting their activism to seminars, statements, and the occasional street rally. For them to cross the line into full-scale political activism involves an existential decision which is not made so readily.

The fact that Yunus was willing to cross this line, giving up his international celebrity status where he regularly meets with monarchs and presidents around the world and to separate himself from the Grameen organization which he has built with his sweat and blood into a Nobel-worthy institution, was indeed a major

decision. He may have naturally expected that if he was willing to make such a major sacrifice, lesser mortals should have been willing to make their own sacrifices.

However, human logic does not work that way. Yunus has already achieved everything. If his political venture goes wrong he will still be a global celebrity with the added recognition that he tried his best to introduce a new political culture into Bangladesh. His associates may not be able to return to their old lives so easily and so had to compute their costs and benefits from political activism more carefully. In due course, some and eventually many among civil society may have joined Yunus, but this decision would have taken time, depending on who else was taking the first step across the line and the political impact of the new party.

Yunus also expected some political activists from the existing political parties to join him. There is a considerable disillusionment within the mainstream political parties with the leadership, and apprehension that reform within the parties would not be possible without democratizing the party's decision making process. In such circumstances at least some members of these parties were not averse to exploring new options. Some of these smaller parties and their leaders may also have looked for a new political rallying point with an inspirational leader such as Yunus or may have sought to build political alliances with his party. Some of these parties have, for some time, been clamoring for a third force in Bangladesh politics.

However, politicians are political animals. They understand success and are less prone to quixotic gestures. If the new party was a going concern they would be more inclined to review their options. They would also like to know more about the future of the mainstream parties and the scope for reform as well as political realignments within these parties. To form the new party has political costs which could only be borne if the eventual benefits of accessing power would be seen as within the realms of the feasible.

In such circumstances, the notion that political activists of diverse times would instantly rally

to him was quite an unreasonable expectation on the part of Yunus. More to the point few people, whether from civil society or the existing political parties, would respond to Yunus without being presented with a clearer idea of where Yunus was coming from and where he was going.

In Bangladesh's political culture, fantasy plays a big part and everyone is free to invent or imagine all sorts of conspiracies. Yunus, as with any other political figure, would thus have needed to persuade people that he is his own man with his own agenda. One way for Yunus to establish his bona-fides would have been to sit with various constituencies in civil society — human rights activists, women's groups, workers and peasant organizations, professional bodies and with ordinary citizens' groups around the country, to share their concerns about the nation, discuss their ideas for change, and discern their expectations from a new party.

In turn, Yunus would have needed to spell out his own vision for the future, and how he hoped to operationalize his vision into concrete solutions for problems facing the country within a time-bound context. He would have to spell out the nature of the party he hoped to organize, and the sort of people he expected to join the party. Through such an interactive process, he would expect to project his own agenda, mobilize support, recruit members and gradually build a national organization. Such a process would take time, pain, sweat, and disappointments. It would involve mistakes, but above all, it would generate knowledge, and experience, the most important capital needed to build a new party. I am not privy to the specific motives which persuaded Yunus to withdraw from politics so it would not be appropriate for me to pass judgment on the wisdom of his decision.

However, his departure leaves Bangladesh politics with the same political vacuum which has incubated festering problems which continue to demand resolution. This is not to suggest that Yunus and his party were the answer to these problems and may indeed have been still-born. But we have to recognize that we are in this crisis because our mainstream political parties have, over successive regimes, failed to meet the

expectations of their voters and have, instead, left us mired in a swamp of corruption, violence, and malgovernance, from which the nation needs to escape.

It is clear from history, our own and from that of other countries, that military rule is no answer to a nation's problems. All political reforms have to be democratically mandated or they cannot be sustained. In the absence of any political alternative, we have to ask ourselves whether our major parties are in a position to regenerate themselves.

For example, can the BNP aspire to reform the party within the present dynastic leadership structure, or indeed are the very structures of the party corroded and its leaders too committed to their own aggrandizement to reconfigure the party. What we are learning every day about the functioning of the BNP, particularly during its recent tenure in office, suggests that a significant part of its leadership and echelons below them conceive of politics exclusively as an instrument for personal gain.

In the case of the Awami League, current realities demonstrate that as long as Sheikh Hasina chooses to remain in politics she is likely to remain the undisputed leader of the party. So the question to be answered is whether Sheikh Hasina herself recognizes that there is a need for reform in her party and whether she is willing to initiate such a process in collaboration with her colleagues.

Some concrete initiatives for reform urgently demanded from the Awami League leaders would include the democratization of the party, making its finances transparent, ensuring that candidates with a record of service to the party and a clean image are nominated, while musclemen within the party or those with only their wealth to recommend them are marginalized. Some of these actions such as choosing clean candidates and marginalizing mastaans need to be made part of the agenda of all parties otherwise the Awami League would feel politically disadvantaged.

However, reform is not just about process, it is also about what a party has to offer in order to earn public confidence. Thus, the Awami League

has to also rediscover its sense of mission as a party. The party has a long history, which has associated it with all the major democratic struggles in Bangladesh, of which the liberation struggle was its most defining moment. The struggles demanded a close bond between the party and the people.

Yet many of the problems afflicting the Awami League originate in its distancing itself from the very social forces which sustained it and from the constituencies of the deprived who once invested their faith in the party. By trying to appear as all things to all people the Awami League of today appears to have lost its sense of purpose and in many areas appears indistinguishable from its principal opponent. This has led it into a variety of political compromises with political forces which are totally inimical to what the Awami League once stood for. The party thus needs to rethink where it came from and where it intends to take the country.

In rethinking its mission, the Awami League needs to reach out to its old constituencies and to seek out new social forces, which have, in recent years, contributed to what is positive in the country. Its old support bases, long abandoned by the Awami League, include the class of small entrepreneurs, who remain neglected by every government, the working class who were always a source of strength for Bangabandhu, but are now an abandoned constituency, and the small farmers who have tripled our food production, but under donor pressure been starved of resources and victimized by policy.

New forces which remain ignored by all parties and demand attention include the youth, most of whom remain undereducated and unprepared for the market so they are now a fertile recruiting ground for criminal gangs and mastaan politics. Bangladesh today has bred a class of creative, honest, non-defaulting, tax paying entrepreneurs who have led our export boom and could provide a new generation of entrepreneurs to accelerate our growth. This class desperately needs a political home which the Awami League can provide. New constituencies are to be found among women of all classes but particularly the micro-credit

borrowers and garment workers who have demonstrated their worth to the economy. Similarly, large numbers of workers scattered across the country remain an important resource along with the educated professional classes who need to be better utilized.

If such constituencies are to be mobilized, the Awami League will have to fashion concrete policies and programs which are responsive to the needs of these constituencies and beyond them to the voters. These commitments cannot be perceived as electoral slogans but must be made credible through well-thought out time bound programs. To develop such a forward-looking agenda, the Awami League should initiate its own reform process in consultation with civil society, drawing upon the services of various think tanks and professional organizations such as the Bangladesh Economic Association. To do so the party will have to move beyond its core of party faithful and broaden its reach.

If the Awami League fails to visibly engage itself in such a process of regeneration, can a new third force emerge in response to the hunger for political change? I personally see no real prospect in the next two years for such a force, capable of actually organizing itself and winning an election in 2008, emerging in the political arena. I could be wrong. After all, nature abhors a vacuum and so there will always be some attempt to respond to the popular demand for reform.

Without a third force or credible move for reform in the mainstream political parties which can respond to this universally felt need for change, Bangladesh could move into a period of deep uncertainty. All the effort to structure a free and fair election, eradicate corruption, and overhaul the administration, could all unravel during the post-electoral period without a credible commitment from all contesting parties to sustain these reforms.

This could set up another round of confrontational politics, which will take us back to where we started from at the beginning of this year. They say history repeats itself, first as tragedy then as farce. My fear is that the next phase of tragedy may be too protracted and painful for us to enjoy the farce.

P.S.

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