They cannot throw 50,000 people off the land and sell coal at throw-away prices. They cannot agree on the gas price low enough for Tata to set up a steel plant. They cannot deliver Chittagong port to a private company with experience in Iraq.

So what is Plan B?

This is a tricky one. The key word is "legitimacy." Military coups are not encouraged in the Constitution. The boys in khaki are supposed to train for their UN missions in "cantonments" or to harass non Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In the short history of Bangladesh, the army has been in power almost half the time. They come in when the political process has broken down. They would still be illegitimate, which is why the junta will promise early elections, which are deferred. They will be a transitional regime, officially.

The method will be to assemble a team of "technocrats" and go for some quick successes. That means squashing the greedy importers and bringing in basic commodities without the huge mark-ups. Once the price of rice and essentials decline in Kawran Bazar, the middle and poor classes will grudgingly support the army.

If they can keep the lights on, with some fast-track power stations within two years, who knows? The business community wants to make money. The garments owners want the workers to get behind the sewing machines, and pump out the shirts -- paid overtime or unpaid overtime (preferably the latter). They want strikes to be banned in this "priority industry," loans written off, and electricity lines to supply power when they need it.

If the IMF and World Bank can provide generous funds to support these moves, then the military regime will gain legitimacy in the streets and homes, where it matters. They can then ignore Parliament and the courts.

After all, the greatest achievement of the last BNP regime was to ban plastic bags. No one remembers what the Awami League did before, though they are thought to have been not quite as bad.

The middle classes in Dhaka want traffic jams to be sorted out. So one can expect the rickshaws to be forcibly removed to the slums and Old Dhaka. Fleets of modern buses will take their place. The traffic will move faster, for a while, as two million people dependent on the rickshaw income quietly seethe in the slums and home villages.

The criminals will flee, too, from "Operation Clean Heart II," allowing people to get on with their lives. Most will breathe a sigh of relief.

All this is possible and probable. Dhaka will boom.

How it goes wrong

As the Thais have shown us, the military (like the Pope) are not infallible. They can get it wrong, too. The sticking point will be what they do for farmers (very little good) and the millions of unemployed. They will promise jobs for construction for roads, bridges, and buildings in rural areas. They will not be able to impose their will on local leaders and contractors. The army can rule in the cities. It is a lot tougher in rural Bangladesh.

This is not Pakistan. What works in Islamabad will not do so in Dhaka. Any "success" can only be temporary because Pakistan is fiction and needs the army to hold it together in the cities and highways. Bangladesh is real. It is a pity that Plan A politicians don't believe in the country or its people. But that is no excuse for Plan B soldiers to take over, either. Bangladesh is several years away from Plan C.

The breaking point will be decisions made for gas and coal. Initially, enough technocrats (in a form of extended caretaker government advisers) can be found to sign licenses and documents. These will allow for extraction of those energy reserves and agreements for export. Protest will be muted initially. The politicians will be on the run (with their criminal brothers) and pointing fingers from Kolkata or London. The activists will not risk their lives for these absent "leaders."

Three or more years down the line, though, the regime will come under multiple threats. A resurgent and more deadly Islamist force will try the Hezbollah route. This will amount to mere terrorism, rather than articulation of a meaningful resistance. Nevertheless, it will be damaging, even if they fail to win the support of the populace.

A new generation of politicians will emerge to challenge the decisions on gas, coal and concessions in banking, insurance, ports, roads, electricity, water, and more. With the expected crisis in the ready-made garments industry and possibly real estate, the military will not have the answers. We have seen this in Indonesia where the façade crumbled at the first knock.

I discount the possibility of an economic-nationalist regime because they would not receive the foreign backing that is vital to keep it going. So Plan B will go swimmingly for the first couple of years, only to degenerate into a far more dangerous decline after that.

Who can ride the tiger? Once you fall, you get eaten. That is the great risk that is preventing the tanks trundling down to Farmgate and Elephant Road, so far.

This generation of military men are far better educated than the trigger-happy mob of the seventies. Unfortunately for us, they have done too much training and learning in academies in the United States. What do they say (sometimes unfairly)? Generals are always preparing to fight the last war.

One can add: This is not Pakistan. What works in Islamabad will not do so in Dhaka. Any "success" can only be temporary because Pakistan is fiction and needs the army to hold it together in the cities and highways. Bangladesh is real. It is a pity that Plan A politicians don't believe in the country or its people. But that is no excuse for Plan B soldiers to take over, either. Bangladesh is several years away from Plan C. This is another unhappy new year.

Farid Bakht *is a member of the Green Party, UK. All views are personal.*