While in 1990 people mostly equated democracy with four elements: political rule; free and fair election; free media, and civil and political rights; today people are much more aware of the fact that democracy means more than these four features. They understand what it means to live in an "illiberal" democracy. After three successive elections which failed to promote democratic practice within major political institutions, citizens of Bangladesh now have a more mature understanding and expectation. They want to maintain the achievements of the post-military rule: freedom of media and civil society, fundamental civil and political rights, and democratic competition through elections. But they want corrections of many of the democracy deficits they have witnessed. They want end of confrontational politics and agreement on rules of democratic competition and dissent; politics cleansed from the dominance of black money and muscle power; free and fair election without any attempt by state machinery to influence outcome; and practice of democracy within political institutions.

But, above all, citizens want establishment of rule of law, where rule breakers will be punished and not flourish under state patronage. The challenge for the new government that assumed power on January 11 is thus immense. It has to meet people's expectations on both fronts; establishing good governance, and facilitating emergence of "true" democracy. How has the new government fared so far? What could be some of its major challenges?

Three weeks is a short time to assess any government, particularly this new government, which has assumed power in a period of crisis, under emergency provisions, with undefined mandate, and without any visible advance preparation. Up to now the new government has been somewhat cautious and slow in divulging its plans. This has not been altogether a bad approach as it has enabled the government to gauge public opinion and be responsive. On several occasions the government had demonstrated its capacity to quickly rectify some mis-steps when media reports indicated potential negative public opinion. For example, the name of an adviser (Dr Faiz Khan) was withdrawn after adverse reports on him came out in the media. Similarly quick assurances were given to the media when it protested against the possibility of imposition of government control. These responsive actions have helped generate a degree of confidence in the new government but there is still a lot of anxiety about its future direction. This is understandable as the government has been installed under emergency provisions and draws its strength primarily from the support of the military who up to now has remained in the background. Very few people seem to know what the military is thinking and planning and who is calling the shots within the military.



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The reticence on the part of the government to elaborate a road map has provided space for a remarkably open debate in the media about the nature and role of the new government, the meaning of democracy and the constitution, the imperatives of governance and political reforms and prospects of changes in the existing political parties and/or emergence of new political formations. The discussions have articulated a wide range of positions held by members of civil society on a number of contested issues. They have also underscored consensus on selected issues. The emerging contestations as well as consensus should contribute positively in the decision making process of the Fakhruddin government as it starts detailing an agenda and plan for action.

In his first address to the nation on January 21, Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed spelled out the broad outlines of a fairly ambitious agenda that underscore the government's intention to take on board the challenges of facilitating the process of both democracy and good governance. He emphasized several activities: organization of a free, fair and neutral election participated by all parties; reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC); preparation and publication of a flawless electoral roll; freeing the election process from the influence of black money and muscle power; scrutiny of the veracity of income and asset statement of candidates seeking election; de-politicization of civil administration; separation of judiciary from the executive; stern drive against "listed criminals, terrorists, godfathers, extortionists and anti-social elements;" and measures to curb price hike of essentials and increase power supply. He did not give any time frame for the election except to promise polls "at the earliest" after completion of all necessary measures to create "a congenial environment" for a "truly democratic" election.

There appears to be high level of public support in favour of the broad agenda presented by the chief adviser. However, opinions differ as to how much of this agenda the new government can and should undertake. Some favour completion of a limited number of tasks related primarily to organization of a free, fair and credible election such as the reconstitution and