strengthening of EC, preparation and publication of a correct voters list, and depoliticization of officials involved in the election process. They argue that governance and political reforms activities such as cleansing politics from the influence of black money and muscle power and drive against corruption at the top should be left to an elected government. Some others, in contrast, posit that the current government, particularly with its military backing and non-partisan character, is best placed to start the reforms process, including weeding out political corruption, depoliticizing civil administration, and restoring the neutrality and quality of public institutions.

The debate about the role of the Fakhruddin government demonstrates that people are aware of the relevant constitutional issues, (e.g. whether the government should be called caretaker or interim, and limits on its mandate) but for the time being are quite prepared to take a pragmatic position dictated by popular sentiment and the realities on the ground. Popular sentiment certainly demands that the government prioritize the good governance agenda, particularly punishment of crime and corruption at the top. But meeting this expectation will not be easy. Our past experiences of drives against high level crime and corruption have been short lived and only a few have actually been punished. Corruption cases are always difficult to prove in a court of law. The task before the Fakhruddin government is even more daunting than before. Crime and corruption have now become systemic. The livelihoods and fortunes of thousands of people are involved. The government needs to think through carefully how it will carry out and sustain its current drive against crime and corruption as it is bound to hurt the interests of many people, big and small.

The initial steps of the Fakhruddin government -- separation of the judiciary from the executive, reconstitution of the EC with ACC in the offing, arrest of high profile political leaders who are alleged to be involved in corrupt and criminal activities -- have raised high hopes and expectation about the performance of the government. Raising people's expectations is always problematic because then the government has to worry about commensurate delivery. It is always prudent to promise less but deliver on the limited promises than promise a lot and fall short on delivery.

The buzz on the streets and on the TV talk shows is one of a "fresh beginning." There is certainly a hunger to get out of the mess of malgovernance and undemocratic politics. Demand is high to sweep out all bad (however defined) practices of the past and begin anew. But who will do it and how will it be done? Text books tell us that to carry out major reforms we need both inside champions and outside majority constituency support. Granted that the current council of advisers and their military power base will be the inside champions of reforms, but how will they ensure that the reforms will not be resisted or subverted by the very government machineries they head? After all reforms often get blocked during implementation by bureaucratic inertia and road block. Punishments work only for a limited time. Reform champions will have to figure out what kinds of incentive/disincentive structures they can put in so that the opponents can be neutralized and the majority of inside players will be won over to follow a rule-based system.


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However, reforms can not be done by simply inside champions. They need outside allies. Today civil society and the media are obviously playing the role of outside advocates of reforms. But can civil society and the media mobilize and sustain constituencies of support? They can raise awareness and influence public opinion but mobilizing and sustaining constituencies is the task of political parties. The political parties have presence in every village of Bangladesh. Whether we like them or not we cannot wish them away. In fact, recent studies (BRAC State of Governance 2006 Report) show that in the last few decades the major political parties have strengthened their organizational presence down to the ward level in rural and urban areas. So it will be important for reform advocates to develop incentives/disincentives so that the political parties will find it in their own interest to support the reforms agenda. So far, apart from providing lip service, political parties have not behaved in a way to convince anybody that they are serious about governance and political reforms.

There is a lot of talk about the possibility of emergence of an alternative political party. But here again the proponents seem to be pinning their hopes on individual leaders i.e. such a party is on if a certain leader gives a call. If the alternative political party is again dependent on a charismatic leader, then how will the nation ever get out of the system of leadership-based politics?

There are no easy options and no quick fix solutions to the problems that have mounted over the years. It will be wise for the current government to be frank about the difficult choices we all face and to take the people into confidence. The people will be able to handle hard facts about what is realistically achievable within a realistic time frame.

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