Where do we go from here?

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

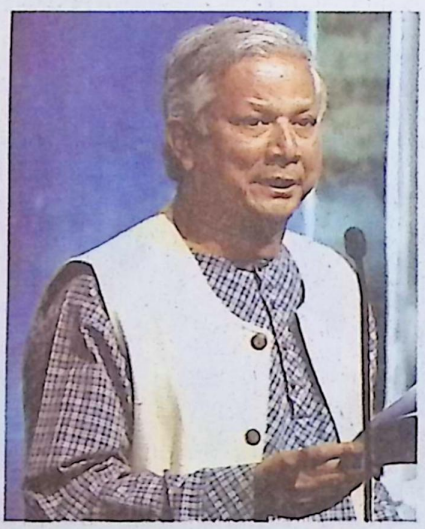
THE precipitate withdrawal by Prof. Muhammad Yunus from the political arena was an unexpected as was his announcement of launching a party. The emphasis is on the word precipitate since neither decision was necessarily surprising. His decision to



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 organiza-



tion 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.



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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