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 bonafides 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.

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.

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.