



### 'Ambitious' reforms may take 4-5yrs

Prof Rehman Sobhan says party to assume power next will have to be sincere in implementing reforms

**"Successive parliaments degenerated into a chamber of commerce for 'crony capitalists...who used their power to advance their business fortunes."**

PROF REHMAN SOBHAN



#### STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent economist Prof Rehman Sobhan yesterday said the interim government will face challenges in implementing most of the reforms, as it promises to transfer power to an elected government within a reasonable time, possibly in 18 months to two years.

To implement such a highly ambitious agenda would demand that the government continue in office for a sufficient length of time, perhaps four or five years. Given the interim government's commitment to hand over power to an elected government within a reasonable period of time, perhaps 18 months or two years, the scope for implementing most of the reforms will be challenging," he said.

Even the reforms initiated by the interim government will require the support of the party that is elected to office, he added.

The commitment and capacity of such a party will have to be assessed in relation to its social and political support and its past record, if it has previously held office," he said.

Prof Sobhan was delivering a lecture on 'Constructing a more just society in Bangladesh', organised in memory of late Nahreen Khan, a

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former student of East West University (EWU) and the daughter of late Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government.

The noted intellectual highlighted the issue of inequality across four key areas - market injustice, inequitable social opportunity, political injustice, and state injustice.

About market injustice, he stressed the need for taking into cognisance unequal labour markets, where accessing a job is itself a social privilege rather than an economic right.

Detailing on inequitable social opportunity, Prof Sobhan said Bangladesh's educational system is profoundly unjust and perpetuates injustice.

Mentioning that the educational budget share remained low even by South Asian standards, he said this resulted in increased access to education quantitatively but the quality, especially in public education, remained low.

He viewed the educational system as a source of discrimination against the less privileged and the perpetuator of social injustice. Public education is largely accessed by lower income households, and thus their opportunities for remunerative engagement in the economy remains limited, he said.

"As a result, we are witnessing a progressive polarisation in the benefits of education due to the superior quality of education available to children of better off families," he said, suggesting substantially enhancing public investment in education - at least five percent of GDP - over the next decade.

On political injustice, Prof Sobhan said electoral democracy, even in the period where it commanded some credibility due to the constitutional provision for being supervised by a non-partisan caretaker government, suffered from many flaws.

"In practice, it had increasingly become a rich man's game. Over the years, we witnessed the escalation

of the role of money in politics, the emergence of politics as an instrument for business, and business as a source of entry into politics," he said.

He said successive parliaments degenerated into a chamber of commerce for "crony" capitalists, who, unconcerned by any issue of conflict of interest, used their power to advance their business fortunes.

He further said what passed for an opposition in the three previous parliaments served largely as an appendage of the ruling party, while the primary function of parliament to hold the government of the day accountable for their acts of omission and commission was largely abdicated.

This nexus between politics and business was not limited just to the Janya Sangsad but was also extended down to the institutions of local government by ruling party office holders who used their positions to monopolise business opportunities available through public expenditures, he said.

"Within such a political order, lower income groups remained excluded so that our primary institutions of governance, our representative institutions, remained undemocratic and highly discriminatory for the majority of the population who could never afford to contest elections.

"In this exclusionary environment, we witnessed the progressive criminalisation of Bangladesh's politics," Prof Sobhan added.

The state has emerged as the patron of crime because one could only be a criminal and a successful one if one stayed out of jail, he said, adding that the loan defaulters could seek the cover of parliament to ensure that no one was going to hold them to account for their default.

"Candidates with defaulted loans were, by law, not permitted to contest elections, but every finance minister relaxed this provision before an election so that the parliament and other elective bodies came to be populated with defaulters who resisted any attempt by parliament to address

the default crisis."

He said the functioning of the state, manifest through its various institutions of governance, created and perpetuated injustice across all walks of society.

How the state spends and collects revenues remains an important source of injustice and reflects its political preferences and societal biases.

"Unfortunately, after all these years, we have no macroeconomic policy regime to underwrite these agendas of poverty alleviation, which, thus, remain basically micro exercises. As a result, we had a state, whose allocative decisions tended to be inspired by the influence of powerful pressure groups."

Prof Sobhan said, "Central to any agenda for constructing a more just society is the need to empower the poor through making better use of their demographic and electoral majority across Bangladesh.

"Bangladesh's poor survive as disempowered individuals with no institutional persona. The primary task of building institutions for the poor should be to enable them to rediscover their collective identity," he said.

He also said the political leaderships need to recognise that the majority of the voting population belongs to this underprivileged class.

"They accordingly need to reach out to this class by empowering them to assume important position in party organisations and nominating them in larger numbers to contest for seats not just in local elections but also to the Janya Sangsad," Prof Sobhan said.

He said the move to realise structurally a more just society remains a longer-term project, but such a goal may be brought forward "if our political leadership sincerely commit themselves to realising a vision for a non-discriminatory more egalitarian, socially just, society."

EWU Chief Adviser Mohammed Farashuddin, EWU Vice-Chancellor Prof Dr Shams Rahman, and Prof Fakrul Alam, a former professor of English department at Dhaka University, also spoke among others.