Primary colours

Want intra-party democracy and "clean" candidates? Nominate through primaries, says **Faisal Salahuddin**



IN Bangladesh, the very vehicles of democracy -- the major political parties -- are undemocratic. They are centralized and autocratic -- mostly due to their dynastic nature. Lack of intra-party democracy ultimately catapulted us into the current political crisis in Bangladesh. The fact that even the senior leaders always keep mum when it comes to the party heads reflects the potentially abusive authority of our top leaders. Change is long overdue.

How can we catalyze intra-party democracy and attract "clean" candidates to the political system? The solution lies in revamping the way parties nominate their parliamentary candidates.

Under the current nomination circus, the party heads nominate candidates through "interviews" behind closed doors in Hawa Bhaban or Dhanmondi. Voters and/or grassroot party members have little say in the process. This, in turn, often marginalizes honest politicians, stifles intra-party competition of honest ideas and candidates, and exports the personal animosity between the two top leaders to the candidate level, perpetuating the cycle of confrontational politics.

This centralized nomination fuels corruption and encourages horse-trading (evidence: the Ershad saga from last year). Democracy gets hijacked by a small coterie of operators around the party heads. Parties become increasingly inflexible and less responsive to the voters' needs.

We need a nomination process where politicians would compete more for voters' approval and less for that of the party heads. We need to eliminate the rent-seeking behaviour rampant in the current process. Furthermore, we as voters need a larger menu of candidates instead of the pre-selected one dictated by the party head.

Here, I argue that nomination through primary elections ("primaries") can combine the above features.