Primaries would democratize the intra-party decision process and decentralize power from Dhanmondi to, say, Dhamrai, from Hawa Bhaban to Hatia. A transparent and decentralized nomination process -- through increased intra-party democracy -- would, as in many countries: i) reduce corruption; ii) encourage honest candidates; iii) increase people's participation.

What is a primary election?

In a primary election, voters in a constituency select the party candidates for the parliamentary election. In other words, primary elections are generally those in which each political party decides its nominee for the upcoming general election by holding an early election among the prospective party nominees (Wikipedia).

Primaries vary, depending on who can vote during the primaries. Some are open only to the registered party voters. In the Bangladeshi context, open primaries -- where a registered voter regardless of his or her own party affiliation can vote -- may make the most sense. It is easier to monitor; it also encourages wider participation. The specific form of primary, however, can be decided thorough national debate.

It is crucial that political parties promote primary challenges -- that is when an elected official is challenged in an upcoming primary election by a member of his own party. Primary challenges would increase the political space within the party and will, thus, be the key to fostering intra-party democracy.

Political parties in the US use primaries to select their candidates for congress or senate. Primaries are also used to select US presidential candidates.

History of primary elections in the US

In the 19th century, the degree of fraud and corruption in America approached (in some cases exceeded) that of today's most corrupt developing nations (hint: Bangladesh), as municipal governments and robber barons alike found new ways to steal from taxpayers and swindle investors (see work on corruption by John Wallis from University of Maryland).

A nexus of corruption between politicians and large businesses exploited common people. The popular backlash to these corrupt practices manifested itself through the Progressive Movement, which fought for, and eventually gave birth to, many of the key US reforms.

These reforms increased transparency and reduced corruption by raising accountability of businesses (e.g. by anti-trust law) and politicians/parties (e.g. by primary elections). The primary election was adopted to undercut the power of local and state political machines, and to bring into the parties fresh candidates, new ideas, and organized constituencies such as unions.

Through the primary process, contenders in the primary election promoted self-critical public debates and strengthened democracy by addressing weaknesses in their own parties. Primaries, thus, increased transparency and accountability within the political parties by allowing intra-party democracy and competition (see work on political competition by Prof. Ansolabehere of MIT).

All reforms create some losers and some winners. The losers from primaries were the corrupt politicians.



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