The winners included the honest politicians emboldened by the public debate during primaries and, of course, by the people.

Is the US experience relevant for Bangladesh?

Yes. The political dysfunctions in the 19th century US and the 21st century Bangladesh may have different manifestations -- but their diseases are quite similar. The US dysfunctions stemmed from the local and state political machines, which often colluded with businesses. Ours from the dynastic (and undemocratic intra-party) politics. Like today's Bangladesh, the US in the 19th century was undergoing rapid industrialization. Wealth created by industrialization made political corruption attractive, and political patronage lucrative. In the absence of transparency-promoting institutions, incumbent politicians in the local and state legislatures did not want political competition. They subscribed to the winner-takes-all attitude.

Against this backdrop, primaries provided a long awaited platform for local debates and dialogues within the party. Subsequent reduction in systematic corruption in the US political system owes much to primary elections.

The diseases in our major parties are more severe than they were in the US. We, therefore, need a stronger dosage of the same medicine -- political competition through primary elections.

Primaries, coupled with a little bit of sunlight, may cure many chronic political infections.

Why should the parties in Bangladesh support primaries?

Primaries would reestablish trust in our political institutions. Without trust in parties, democracy suffers from power vacuum. Trust is not a zero-sum game; all major parties can enjoy trust surge from nomination reform.

Primaries would be an electoral asset for the parties. As the Latin American experience has shown, parties that adopted primaries tend to do better in the elections (Journal of Politics, 2006).

In fact, the party to first implement primaries may enjoy the first mover's advantage. They may reap the "primary bonus" -- higher electability of their candidates -- because primaries tend to select stronger candidates for the general election (The Journal of Politics, 2006).

Primaries will save the politicians from themselves by increasing competition among them. Transparent debates will make it more "profitable" for a candidate to be honest than to be corrupt, by making them more electable.

Primaries can ensure that party remains above person by allowing timely reforms. These democratic reforms can, ultimately ensure the long-term survival of the major parties. Otherwise, parties -- like species or civilizations -- can become extinct unless they evolve with changing times.

One concern could be that primaries might weaken the central authorities. Yes they might. But weakening the central authorities would not necessarily weaken the party. In fact, the opposite will happen. Ultimately, primaries would make the party stronger by making changes at the top through democratic process and by electing the most deserving leader.

Current and would-be politicians should ask their parties to adopt primaries as a hedge against the whims of the party heads and the select few. Honest leaders then would be able to channel their energy toward pleasing the voters who they are supposed to serve -- instead of the party heads and their family members.

Of course the current beneficiaries of the centralized nomination process will not want to relinquish their power. In this regard they may need "encouragement" from all segments of the society. Media can play a vital role. So can the civil society. Now is an historic opportunity to forge consensus among honest politicians, media, civil society and, most important, common citizens to demand transparency in the nomination process.

Why should voters support primaries?



AMIRUL RAJIV

The answer is simple. Through primaries, power would gradually emigrate to voters, who should be the ultimate players in a democracy. The vehicles of democracy -- the parties -- would be what they are supposed to be -- democratic. Less of the democratic apparatus would be up for sale -- both intra-party and inter-party.

The transparency of primaries would enforce honesty on the leaders, who now run Bangladesh with their remote controls from behind closed doors. The country would be less of a hostage to the personal whims of, and animosity between, our party heads.

Let's support transparent nomination. Let's nominate through primaries.

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