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## **US system could rescue the public from corrupt councillors**

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The ANC announced in the last few weeks that it intends to screen nominees to stand in the forthcoming local government elections in Gauteng. The main aim is to ensure that only reliable, principled and focused candidates can stand for elections under the ANC banner.

One would assume this has been a practice all along, where political parties stringently screen candidates who stand on a party ticket. But this commitment by the ANC in Gauteng is, nonetheless, significant and assuring of the party's commitment to serving the people, and may subsequently need to be taken a step further.

Quite important here is the fact that the ANC intends to involve community members in screening candidates for local government elections this time around.

Americans have formalised this system and call it "primaries", where party candidates do not automatically gain a party ticket, but have to go through the screening process where they are assessed against their fellow party members.

In the US primaries system, there is an internal contest for party tickets that openly takes place among members of the same political party. Those who win primaries against their fellow comrades then proceed to stand for elections on the party ticket against candidates from other political parties. The primaries are taken very seriously in the US electoral process because if a candidate fails to gain the primaries nomination or vote, then such a candidate will by law not be allowed to stand on a party ticket.

The candidate may yet take a chance to stand as an independent, but not on the party ticket that he or she failed to secure during the primaries.

This process is aimed at ensuring that those who stand on a party ticket represent the principles that a party stands for. This is to verify the proximity between election candidates and political party.

In that way political parties would be in a position to minimise the risk of the emergence of potentially rogue candidates, who have remote attachment and affinity to what the party stands for.

This is a useful channel for bigger and complex parties such as the ANC, where the party's internal selection processes may not be relied upon to identify and eliminate potentially troublesome candidates who might tarnish the values that the party stands for.

Remember one Truman Prince in the Western Cape?

In a complex party with such a diverse constituency as the ANC, primaries will afford candidates an opportunity to openly state how they understand and practically aim to implement the party's values.

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Voters will then not rely on the broader manifesto of the party as a final statement of programme of action. Primaries will allow individuals from the same party to offer their practical explanations of what their party stands for.

Those who vote in primaries would then vote for candidates who have a better grasp of things.

Election primaries, as the system is dubbed in the American electoral vocabulary, is a system aimed at ensuring that internal democracy takes place within a political party in terms of leadership emergence.

A leader or candidates that emerge through primaries can be said to have openly gained the confidence of party members and, to some extent, the general public.

The system is also interesting in the sense that it avoids the emergence of leaders who would manipulate the party's internal voting system in an unfair manner.

The campaigns during primaries are carried out in public. The ANC leadership has been subjected to practices such as secret vote buying, intimidation and underhand lobbying.

Voters in primaries are voting secretly, in a similar way that they would vote during the usual elections after primaries are concluded.

With the use of primaries where communities are involved, the process of selection of party candidates is subjected to the public opinion. In that way, during final elections when leaders are elected into public office, citizens are then afforded an opportunity not to elect a better evil, but to elect individuals who have passed through the primaries and, hence, such candidates would carry a much heavier mandate than can be said about candidates who go through internal party processes only.

The need to screen candidates for local government elections is not a paranoia that could be said to be shared among those who have profound suspicion towards the ANC. Alliance partner Cosatu has recently made a statement to the effect that it would support the ANC in the 2011 local government elections.

The federation reiterated, however, that it would not support candidates who are known to be corrupt and incompetent. Clearly, Cosatu is comfortable with the ANC and its principles, but the union is concerned with individuals who seem to have mastered a way to manipulate the party's internal processes and use it to emerge as nominees for local government elections.

If the ANC is battling this internal problem, then the party needs to simply rally communities to assist in verifying and screen nominees through primaries.

Let us not undermine the importance of the manner in which the ANC nominate candidates for local government elections.

The reigning system where party branches are used as channels for nominating election candidates is, in principle, democratic and far-reaching. However, the process remains too much embedded within the party. With deteriorating conditions of the ANC branches seen in the form of infighting and fierce lobbying, the process could be salvaged by shifting a certain level of responsibilities for nominating candidates to communities along the ward system.

This is different from saying that branches will be replaced by community wards operating outside the ANC. The ANC would still follow the processes that take place at branch level as a first step to nominating candidates to stand in party primaries.

Communities registered within the ward council would then weed out unlikeable candidates that have emerged through the branch, leaving those who are deserving of standing for elections on the party ticket. This will intensify the democratic processes as we know it. Citizens will then bear some level of responsibilities for candidates who are elected

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in final elections.

There is clearly a wider gap between the ANC as a party and the candidates who stand on the party ticket. In between the ANC and local government candidates lie communities, who could be rallied to participate in primaries and reduce the chances of the emergence of rogue candidates.

This is not about not trusting the ANC's internal processes, but about allowing communities to have a larger share or stake in shaping the results of the elections in a way that presents communities with real options when it comes to who is voted into local government.

There is no need to fully formalise the primaries system in a similar manner that Americans have done. The system can be adapted without having to undergo a major overhaul of the electoral system in the country.

Primaries are still party mechanisms and they do not entail a shift in the electoral system. The system can be used to reinstate confidence of citizens in party politics.

Of course, those who lose elections during primaries would still need to concede and then rally behind the winning candidates and the party ticket upon which the candidate stands. Elections should be about the extent to which voters shape outcomes, and subsequently identify with the results.

Voters have a higher level of acceptance and co-operation when they feel they have played a role in shaping the outcomes.

By giving citizens more say, the ANC could save itself from opportunistic elements whose intentions to run for elections are only aimed at personal enrichment.

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