

Russian Party System: An Introductory Analysis

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Abstract

Political parties are the bedrock of a political system as they are the foundational element of a competitive electoral system. With the elimination of monolithic party system under Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU), Russia moved towards the multi-party system under the presidentship of Mikhail Gorbachev which was continued under the regime of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin too. The present article traces the journey of Russian party system with its special distinctive features and different phases of development in a wholesome manner.

Keywords: Russian Party System, Introductory Analysis, political system

Introduction

A multi party system is an inevitable part of a democratic political system since political party functions as buffer between civil society and the state (Chenoy 2001) ^[1]. Though the arrival of procedural multi-party system is purely a post-communist phenomenon yet the history of party system in Russia is almost incomplete without taking into account the historical underpinnings of the developments in final years of erstwhile USSR. Soviet Union was dominated by a monolithic party under Communist Party of Soviet Union. A single party dominated the political system since 1917 revolution which was later renamed as CPSU in 1952 (Hill 1997). Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his 'new thinking' and 'de-idealisation' consist of 'Glasnost' i.e. openness and 'Perestroika' i.e. restructuring to reform the Russian political and party system. It has brought drastic changes in restructuring and transforming the Russian party system by introducing the element of openness and democratic decision making highly influenced with the Anglo-Saxon model of democracy. This ushered a watershed period in the political party system of post-Communist Russia by introducing elements of free and democratic multiparty system identified as the hallmark of Euro-American model of democracy.

Elements of political parties

The basic elements of a party consist of are four main elements (Duverger 1954). First, Caucus is of limited nature as it consists of a small number of members which seeks no expansion. It functions in a large geographical area generally to the chief electoral division. Second, 'Branch' is less centralised than caucus as it's an only part of the whole; therefore, its separate existence is inconceivable. Third is termed as the 'Cell'. It has an occupational basis uniting all party members working at the same places like the factory, workshop, shop, office and administrations etc. Fourth can be mentioned as 'Militia' which is a kind of private army whose members are enrolled on military lines.

Party System-a theoretical concept

According to Sartori (1976), collection of different parties make for a "system". Thus, party system is the system of

interactions resulting from inter-party competition. Sartori (1976) argues that the party system in modern world can be broadly of three types like single party system, bi-party system and competitive party system. He enumerates sub-variants of single party system into one party, hegemonic party and predominant party rule. He argues that the monopoly of one party in a political system is termed as one party system. Bi-party system refers to a system where two political parties compete with each other to obtain absolute majority. Multi-party system is a kind of party system where multiple parties compete with each other on legitimate grounds to gain electoral mandate of whom they are going to represent in legislative bodies (Sartori 1976). According to Sartori (1976), a multi-party system has some chief attributes. Firstly, there must be the existence of relevant opposition party/parties. Secondly, the presence of the opposition could not only unilateral rather it can be bi-lateral or multi-lateral. Thirdly, a variety of principle and philosophy based groups should exist who believe in adherence to fundamentals. Finally, to outbid each other, there is tendency of overpromising widespread among the parties. Thus, in a nutshell, party system recognizes dissent and institutionalizes opposition (Sartori 1976).

Party System in Russia- Some Observations

Perepechko and *et al.* (2007) ^[3] argue that in Russia major cleavage structures are centre/ periphery, urban/ rural, libertarian cosmopolitanism/ authoritarian socialism and so on. They broadly categorized the existing fault lines of western European society in terms of landed interest/ industrial interest of employers, capitalists, entrepreneurs on the one hand with the interest of worker, labourers, and socialists on the other. He argues that elements of parliamentary and institutionalized parties can be seen in political parties like CPRF, Yabloko and LDPR while there were some Parties representing special corporatist interest e.g. The Agrarian party. Some personal parties too emerged just before election to promote political leaders for instance LDPR in initial days surfaced to promote Zhirinovskiy which later transformed into a parliamentary party. Besides, Small groups of incumbent deputies elected and running for re-election too emerged on the political scene. "Democracy" like parties was representing parties of activist.

Further he locate DCR party i.e. Democratic Choice of Russia- a liberal and pro-market and Yabloko party- a liberal and moderately pro-market along with Our Home is Russia- a centrist party on the libertarian segment of political axis while CRPF on the authoritarian socialist segment.

Party System in Russia–Phases of Development

White and *et. al* (1995) observe that though the monopoly of CPSU in Russian political system was eliminated in the early 1990s but the party formation in Russian Federation was still in its infancy period by the early 1990s.

In 1990, the Liberal Democratic Party under Vladimir Zhirinovskiy emerged supporting the idea of a state based on law and a market economy. Similarly about 20 various parties and movements can be identical with the “centre” of the political spectrum including the Agrarian Party, the Constitutional Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Russia led by Former CPSU member Nikolai Travkin. Finally there were ‘left’ groups consist with the socialist and Social Democratic parties, the Greens and an Anarcho-Syndicalist confederation. Further to the left were the political groups claiming to inherit the legacy of CPSU including the communist party of Bolsheviks, the Russian Party of Communists, the socialist workers Party and re-established Menshevik Party. They believe that there has been weak development of political parties in post-communist Russia (White and *et. al* 1995). This was not only the single obstacle in the formation of party system without parties. They add that there were still formidable obstacles to the development of a more coherent party system that could actively engage a wider section of the Russian masses

A viable political alternative to CPSU in term of political parties or formation could not take root in early days of the existence of Russian political system. Remington (1997) argues that Russia’s political system is an example of a hybrid or mixed system combining presidential and parliamentary elements. Therefore, the immense constitutional and extra-constitutional powers of the president can be attributed to the continued presence of authoritarian elements in the Russian political system. However, there is a discernible pattern in the direction of pluralistic democracy as political parties have frequently used the parliament for their political interest. Remington (1997) expresses hope arguing that diverse political forces represented in parliament are not only able but also capable to agree on policy decisions. They could certainly make parliament an institution which must be taken into account by president and government in final decision making. This will bring both substance and more legitimacy to the democratic setup in Russia.

A number of theoretical studies have been used to shed light over the fragmented nature of Russian Political Parties. Some of them have stressed over systematic factors like recognizable Social base of new political parties, the absence of Mezzo structures, and lack of civic organisation among the people. Analysts like Richard Sakwa used the systematic perspective by identifying the country specific factor like the emergence of a strong presidency in Russia. However, Golosov (1998) divides the Russian parties into two types of formations namely Communities of Fate and Communities of Fortune.

The Communist Party of Russian Federation (CPRF) led the left groups in post-Soviet Russia. Its ideology was basically

drawn from social democratic ideas moving away from Soviet type Marxist-Leninist. Chenoy (2001) ^[1] argues that third Duma election held in 1999 came with very surprising result where not only the Communist Party of Russian Federation (CPRF) emerged as the largest party in the parliament but also the new centrist party of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin- The Unity Bloc-Capture the second position. Besides, the votes were divided between six parties in a hung parliament. More significantly, Putin and the Kremlin leadership perceived the electoral result as the endorsement of their policies in Chechnya which had considerable impact on Russia’s regional politics in future. Despite of its various short comings democratic base for a for a multi party system has been established by the end of the 1990s. A new political culture emerged from the scratch of emerging political behaviour. The Russian electorate against the parties identified with the govt. Thus they not only rejected the shock-therapy therefore model of economic-reform but also the ideology of ultra nationalism. Besides, they too voted against violence and corruption (Chenoy 2001) ^[1].

Stages of party development in Russian Party System

Sakwa (2008) ^[4] argues that party and party system development in Russia evolved through four main phases. First phase can be termed as the ‘insurgency stage’ (1985-91) of movements and informal organisations in the aftermath of dissolution of the monolithic party system under CPSU parties. By the end of the phase the emerging multi party system was highly fragmented. Second phase can be attributed as the ‘phony democracy’ corresponding to the period of August 1991 to October 1993. Third, the ‘dual adaptation’ stage was marked by the adoption of the new constitution and the first genuine national multi party election of December 1993. Various personalities were the major centre of power many of whom were outside the parliamentary and party system altogether, and within parties links between the leadership and membership were not so strong. Parties were virtually trapped between strong executive authority and amorphous civil-society. Overall this phase was still marred with the weakness of the party-system and all reform of social representation. Fourth comes the ‘formalization stage’ (2000-onwards) which can be associated with something approaching the emergence of the party system with effective parties, differentiated programs and stable electorates. Putin’s arrival and domination throughout this period was marked by differentiation in three ways.

Thus, in other words, there is a discernible positive pattern in response to the fragmentation of political system by the consequent regimes. Majority of them attempted to resurrect the course of Russian political system and interestingly, Putin scored well among his counterparts on aforementioned ground. President Putin made serious bid to form stable party system in Russia. The law and political parties in 2001 is designed to create a system consisting of fewer parties with all of them becoming national in scale and magnitude as well (Mohanty 2010). Collective membership was banned throughout Russia. Funding of political parties was placed under control of various guidelines. Likewise the law on political parties, modified in October 2004, stipulated further restrictions for smaller parties to make arena of competitive elections free from non-serious political parties. Above all, to overcome the communist party’s legacy has been a major

factor in Russia's transition from communism to democracy (Hill 1997).

Conclusion

With the introduction of Glasnost and Perestroika, the then President of USSR Mikhail Gorbachev had introduced new elements of openness and freedom in Russian party system and political system as well. It led to the elections, though not free and fair, and existence of political parties in the newly organized political system of Russian Federation. This in turn led to the proliferation of political parties giving tough electoral competition to the erstwhile dominant party-CPSU. This also led to the gradual evolution of Russian political system and the development of Russian party system in different stages. However, no any party became so dominant as was the United Russia Party later decades under the charismatic leadership of Vladimir Putin. This

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