OCCASIONAL PAPER

Restoring Competitive Politics: Electoral Contestation and the Future in Turkey and India, and Iran and Russia

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This report summarises the proceedings of a conference held at LSE IDEAS in June 2023. The comments of each contributor at the conference are summarised here by the author of this report.

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1. Introduction

The institutions and practices necessary for open and fair competition for political power are eroding across the world. In some countries, such as Turkey and India, the democratic dividend of electoral competition has been steadily undermined by majoritarian autocrats who have proved adept in campaigning for office and winning elections. In others, such as Russia and Iran, political leaders have marginalised or suppressed electoral processes, reducing them to closely managed performances that seek to demonstrate public consent. At least some traces of the mechanisms of electoral competition often remain in place, however, even where genuine public consent has been almost extinguished. This leaves open the possibility that the trend away from competitive electoral politics could be at least partially reversed in future, in the context of political succession or the electoral defeat of incumbents.

In June 2023, LSE IDEAS brought together experts from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and other institutions to examine the potential for restoring the democratic dividend of competitive politics in four major countries. Turkey and India were selected for their timeliness—national parliamentary and presidential elections were held in Turkey in May 2023, and national parliamentary elections are due in India in April 2024—and for their similarities: both political systems are characterised by powerful elected leaders with a strong record of performance in national elections, each backed by large political parties based on an appeal to national and religious identity. Iran and Russia were chosen as examples of two states where competitive electoral politics had been temporarily enabled by significant political change—respectively, an impasse in Iran's theocracy in the 1990s, and the end of the Soviet Union—only to be undermined by the reassertion of autocratic power.

Two assumptions underlay the planning of this discussion on 'Restoring Competitive Politics: Electoral Contestation and the Future'. The first is that the characterisation of political systems as either democratic or autocratic provides an insufficient basis for explaining many differences in the workings of political institutions, or for guiding policy. The second assumption is that while certain institutions and practices appear to be essential to maintaining open competition for political power—including for example, freedom and diversity of comment in major channels of communication like broadcast television, radio, newspapers, and social media—there is no useful empirical example or theoretical formulation of an ideal or perfect democratic political system.

The exclusion from the discussion of countries with longer established forms of competitive politics, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, was not intended to suggest an implicit comparison with ideal types of functioning democracies. On the contrary, there are grounds for concern about the maintenance of open competition for political power in every country professing to be a democracy. As David Runciman has said of the future of democratic practices: 'The question for the twenty-first century is how long we can persist with institutional arrangements we have grown so used to trusting, that we no longer notice when they have ceased to work.' He warns that 'democracy could fail while remaining intact'.[1]

Hugh Sandeman
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2. Turkey: Pre-Election Crisis, Post-Election Stability? Lessons from the May 2023 Turkish Vote

Professor Yaprak Gursoy

The outcome of the presidential election in Turkey in May 2023, won by incumbent president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP (Justice and Development Party) party-led coalition with a narrow but decisive margin, was a surprise to many observers. Public opinion polls had predicted that opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu and a broad coalition led by his own CHP (Republican People's Party) party would gain just under 50% of the vote in the first round, and possibly even win the crucial presidential election outright by achieving a majority of the popular vote. These expectations were reversed. Erdogan polled 49.5% of the first- round vote, while Kilicdaroglu trailed with 44.9%, giving Erdogan a decisive advantage entering the second round, which he won with 52.2% against 47.8% for his opponent. Turnout in the first and second presidential rounds was 89% and 86% of eligible voters, respectively. In the concurrent parliamentary elections, Erdogan's People's Alliance—AKP, the nationalist MHP and several smaller parties—gained 49% of votes cast and 323 seats, while the Nation Alliance—CHP, IYI (an MHP breakaway group), and four smaller parties—polled 35%, taking 212 seats.

The political and economic background to the May 2023 elections were challenging for Erdogan. Turkey's annual rate of inflation was 55% at the time of the election; the Turkish lira had depreciated sharply by 22% against the US dollar in the preceding year, and income and food insecurity were widespread. The earthquake in south-east Turkey in February 2023 had exposed government complicity in regulatory failures throughout the construction industry, one of the main sources of the country's economic growth.

Despite this sense of crisis, Erdogan achieved almost the same share of the vote in 2023 as he had in the 2018 presidential election (52.6%), and in his first direct presidential election in 2014 (51.8%). For more than two decades since his victory in the general elections of November 2002—just prior to his appointment as prime minister—Erdogan's dominance of Turkey's electoral map outside the biggest cities, the western coastal provinces and the mainly Kurdish south-east has remained intact. Expectations that economic and other crises could weaken Erdogan's appeal to voters underestimated the emotional attachment of supporters to his personal leadership.

The main characteristics of Erdogan's political practice have been identified by several observers.[2] His route to power lay through elections and then the gradual usurpation of power from institutions, including the parliament; his electoral appeal enabled by populist and polarising discourse. Elections in Erdogan's Turkey maintain legitimacy and produce majoritarian outcomes. These electoral contests are free, in the sense that voters make their own choices, and the votes are generally counted accurately, but they are not fair: for example, media coverage is significantly biased towards the incumbent. Authoritarian tactics are used to coopt individuals and institutions to Erdogan's cause, while repression is directed against political opponents such as elected opposition mayors in major cities and Kurdish political leaders.

In their research on the collapse of authoritarian regimes and the political systems that follow, Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz have pointed out that the significance of elections in authoritarian political systems varies between three types of regimes: military, dominant party, and personalist.[3]

Characteristics of personalised authoritarian political systems include: the use of referendums as a decision-making mechanism; the narrowing of the leader's inner circle; the installation of loyalists in positions of power, especially in the courts, security services, military and civil service; the promotion of family members to powerful posts; the creation of new security services; and the creation of a new political party or movement.[4] Turkey under Erdogan appears to be gradually transitioning from a dominant party to a personalised regime.

> 'There were also problems with the messages of the [Turkish] opposition campaign. To avoid putting off his supporters who might be prepared to switch votes, criticism of Erdogan's performance, including his response to the February earthquake, was muted.'

The research by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz suggests that there is potential for the reversal of personalised rule, and that the most viable mechanism for this is through elections. Of 281 authoritarian regimes included in their dataset during the sixty-five years to 2010, 223 (79%) had collapsed.[5] The average duration of authoritarian regimes that had collapsed during this period was seven years for military, eleven years for personalist, and twenty-six years for dominant party systems.[6] Out of these 223 cases of authoritarian regime failure, 45% were replaced with electoral systems that were sufficiently competitive to be designated as democratic. Military regimes that collapsed were most likely to give way to a democratic outcome (52% of cases) than personalist (31%) or dominant party systems (14%). Elections have been the primary mechanism for the restoration of competitive politics following the failure of authoritarian political systems.

Although their electoral processes are unfair, the hybrid nature of electoral authoritarian regimes leave them vulnerable. Elections can be won by the opposition if they are allowed to contest. Examples include national elections in Indonesia (1999), Croatia, Ghana, Peru, Senegal, and Serbia (2000), Kenya (2002), Ukraine (2004), Ecuador and Peru (2021), and Colombia (2022). Local elections in Turkey in 2019 demonstrated the ability of strong and well-organised candidates to prevail over the ruling AKP party.

These examples draw attention to how elections are contested, and to the role of electoral oppositions. Howard and Roessler found in their research on 'Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes' that the background context for elections, including economic crisis, did not appear to be decisive.[7] The electoral strategies of the opposition were more important. Critical elements

for the effective performance of the opposition include forming coalitions and unifying against the incumbent, new and innovative campaign strategies, hight turnout rates and mobilisation, and electoral monitoring to secure ballot boxes.[8]

Political parties opposed to Erdogan's People's Alliance did achieve a degree of unity in the 2023 Turkish presidential elections. The opposition Nation Alliance—formed for the elections—brought together a broad range of political opinion, including secular, nationalist, religious conservative, and Kurdish voters—the last group in the presidential election. But the grassroots mobilisation of voters by the opposition was weak. There was limited canvassing of voters in local neighbourhoods, and it was impossible for the opposition to communicate through established media channels, leaving them unable to combat false information. Electoral monitoring was incomplete, particularly in eastern Turkey, and no clear account was available of the extent of electoral fraud.

There were also problems with the messages of the opposition campaign. To avoid putting off his supporters who might be prepared to switch votes, criticism of Erdogan's performance, including his response to the February earthquake, was muted. The problems of Turkey's foreign policy were also ignored, for fear of arousing nationalist sentiment. The opposition's tactical response to its first-round performance was confusing. Seeking to narrow Erdogan's lead, the Nation Alliance risked alienating Kurdish and liberal voters by suddenly introducing in the second round a harsh nationalist tone to their rhetoric, reinforcing the impression that there were no significant ideological differences between the two camps. One lesson from the 2023 Turkish election is the limitation of attempting to unify a large opposition electoral coalition on a top-down basis.

In the short term, further entrenchment of Turkey's personalised regime can be expected, but elections remain the best option to reverse authoritarianism.

Dr Karabekir Akkoyunlu

The consistent share of the vote won by Erdogan in the three presidential elections since 2014, at just over 50%, demonstrates the limits to his dominance of Turkish politics. Among the constraints on his power are the nature of Turkey's political economy, and its legacy of electoral competition.

Turkey is not a rentier state; there is no natural resource endowment available, and the government therefore depends for its fiscal capacity on productive areas of the Turkish economy. Economic growth in turn depends on extensive links with the world economy, requiring international commitments, and a requirement for competitiveness, that constrain Turkish sovereignty. This underlies Erdogan's search for ways to diversify Turkey's interdependencies.

Competitive elections have been held in Turkey since 1950, and electoral legitimacy is still essential to stable political rule. Electoral mechanisms are efficient on the day, allowing the opposition to punish incumbency as occurred in the two Istanbul mayoral elections in 2019; although, longer-term institutional arrangements such as control of the media by government-friendly businesses profoundly distort political outcomes.

The consolidation by Erdogan of a majoritarian presidential system has made the achievement of electoral legitimacy more demanding than in the prior parliamentary system, though it offers him a firmer grip on power. The AKP organisation, with over eleven million members within an electorate of approximately sixty million, has become indistinguishable from the apparatus of the Turkish state. The AKP acts as a bridge between the president, government officials and business. In rural areas, personal links to the AKP are a lifeline. There are many people who have reason to worry about the collapse of AKP rule, and they may worry more when the economy is in trouble.

An institutional weakness of personalised rule is the management of succession, in Erdogan's case, likely around his health. An opposition party or grouping could win a presidential election, but they need a long-term strategy for this rather than an improvised alliance, and they could not assume that the electoral process would lead to victory.

3. India: Explaining the Success of Modi's BJP

Professor Sumantra Bose

Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, or Indian People's Party) appears more likely than not to win a third successive legislative majority in Indian national elections due in April-May 2024. This would imperil India's standout achievement of developing a functioning democracy in the world's most populous nation and could mark a decisive shift towards a *de facto* autocracy. Most of the electoral system would survive, but effective political competition and constitutionally guaranteed freedoms would be further at risk.

The implications of the Modi era extending into its second decade include the consolidation of personalised rule, for which there is no precedent in independent India's history aside from the relatively brief exception of Indira Gandhi. There would also be a further erosion of India's decentralised, quasi-federal structure of government which, as a hybrid of a unitary and a federal system, is vulnerable to centralising constitutional changes. The progressive marginalisation of India's parliament—the key institution of Indian democracy but no longer a robust forum for law-making through deliberation, debate and give-and-take between government and opposition—can be expected to accelerate in a third Modi term. The independence of the judiciary appears to be at risk, as the executive presses for powers to appoint judges. The escalation of punitive policies against the regime's opponents in both formal politics and civil society is also likely.

'The implications of the Modi era extending into its second decade include the consolidation of personalised rule, for which there is no precedent in independent India's history aside from the relatively brief exception of Indira Gandhi.'

The next five years could also be decisive, in the supplanting of the ideals of equality and individual liberties underlying India's constitution with a majoritarian-religious conception of Indian identity. Modi is deeply committed to a specific view of Hindu nationalism that was his life's mission as an activist of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) until he rose to prominence in Gujarat state politics in 2001. The RSS is an all-male, paramilitary-style organisation devoted to the objective (defined as *Hindutva*) of a Hindu nation-state, based on what are perceived to be cultural, linguistic, social, and political affinities as well as a common religious identity. India's Muslims—about one in seven of the Indian population—have no place in this conception.

The BJP under Modi has made steady electoral gains in national elections. In 2009, the BJP polled 19% of votes cast; the second successive election lost by the BJP to the Congress Party's United Progressive Alliance coalition. In 2014, when the BJP dealt Congress and the UPA a severe defeat, the BJP gained 31% of the national vote. This rose to 37% in 2019, or 46% if BJP allies are included. The BJP's nationwide vote had doubled in a decade.

The underlying strength of the BJP's electoral momentum is visible in the difference between opposition party performance against the BJP in selected state elections, and polling in national elections within these same states. Karnataka is the only southern Indian state where the BJP is strong; in the 2018 Karnataka state contest, the BJP won 36% of votes cast, falling just short of a majority in the state legislature. In the 2019 national election, by contrast, the BJP polled 51% of votes cast in Karnataka, winning twenty-five of the state's twenty-eight seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament). This pattern could be repeated: the BJP won the same 36% share in the May 2023 state elections and was decisively beaten by the Congress party (43%), but exit polls suggested that 46% of the Karnataka electorate planned to vote BJP in national elections in 2024.

In the small north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the BJP won a majority in the state legislature in 2017, with 49% of the vote. But in national elections in 2019, the BJP took 69% of votes cast for the state's four Lok Sabha seats. The same pattern is possible in 2024. In West Bengal, the BJP—formerly a marginal party there—has made major advances: 40% of votes in the 2019 national election and 38% in the 2021 state election. In Assam, with a 34% share of Muslims in the state population, the BJP has twice won a majority of seats in recent state elections, evidencing its ability to mobilise votes from a large cross-section of Hindus across castes and ethnolinguistic groups.

Recent elections in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, provide further confirmation of the success of the BJP in bridging old cleavages within Indian politics. Despite an electoral alliance between the two leading state parties—representing Dalits, OBCs (Other Backward Castes) and Muslims—that had previously dominated state politics, the BJP won 50% of votes in the 2019 national elections against 38% for the local alliance. This demonstrated how Modi had widened the BJP's political reach from upper castes to include Dalit and OBC votes.

Turnout in national elections has increased over the Modi era, rising from 58% in 2009 to 60% in 2014, and to 66% in 2019. Rising turnout appears to have benefited the BJP and may be caused by the broadening appeal of the BJP's offer to the electorate.

Modi's successful electoral mobilisation is based on an updated version of the Hindutva ideological creed; one that can be characterised as *Hindutva 2.0*. Modi has grafted his own cult of personality—a man of humble origins who embodies the aspirations of ordinary people—onto the RSS's idea of an organic Hindu nation. Tensions between the Hindutva 2.0 ideology and Indian social conditions—the misogyny of Hindutva, enduring caste divisions despite the appeal to a single Hindu nation, and social and economic inequality—are managed carefully. Modi name-checks B.R. Ambedkar, India's founding constitutionalist and champion of Dalit rights. He and his deputy Amit Shah chose Droupadi Murmu, a woman from a tribal community, to become the ceremonial President of India in 2022; a symbolic gesture to gender and social mobility. Modi's rhetoric, backed up by various populist government schemes, constantly emphasises his government's concern for the welfare of the poor and the disadvantaged.

A master of spectacle, Modi dominates the electoral strategy of Hindutva 2.0. Two of the major political objectives of the RSS have been achieved: the abolition of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, and the removal of legal barriers to the construction of a temple on the site of a razed (December 1992) mosque in the Uttar Pradesh town of Ayodhya. A BJP election victory in 2024 would open the way to the achievement of the third objective: the enactment of a uniform civil code that would replace the religious basis of family law for Muslims and Christians in India. Beyond these objectives, there is the possibility of even deeper commitment to the Hindutva agenda during a third Modi term.

The success of Modi's electoral strategy has been amplified by the weakness of the electoral opposition. The Congress party's base has shrunk to a handful—no more than half-a-dozen or so—of India's twenty-eight states, and it is no longer capable of mounting a nationwide challenge to the BJP. The large assortment of 'regional' (usually one-state) parties are pursuing too diverse a set of electoral strategies—many supporting a possible alliance led by the Congress, some preferring a front of regional parties, and yet others choosing to stand alone and neutral—to provide the basis for a national coalition against the BJP. There are also several regional parties and splinter-groups thereof which are BJP allies. Disparate and fragmented opposition, and the inability of the Congress party and the regional parties to generate leaders with strong national appeal that can rival Modi's, remains a major source of the BJP's advantage.

A BJP victory in 2024 is not inevitable. Modi's formidable political skills have not prevented effective opposition to specific policies, as farmers showed with protests in 2020-2021 that forced the government to climb down. A potent electoral challenge to the BJP in 2024 remains an outside possibility. An opposition alliance, built around the Congress nucleus that includes many major regional parties, stands a chance of denying the BJP a third successive parliamentary majority. If the BJP falls short of an outright majority (272 of 543 seats) in the Lok Sabha that will be elected in May 2024 and is reduced to being the single largest party, that will not prevent the formation of a third Modi government. But it will be a setback to the hegemonic ambitions of Hindu nationalism.

4. Iran: The Destruction of Electoral Competition

Summary of open discussion

The election in 2021 of Ebrahim Raisi as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran marked the final and victorious stage of attempts by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a coalition of extreme rightist and some traditionally conservative groups, and top military commanders—especially in the Revolutionary Guards—to end the genuine, but certainly limited, electoral competition which had emerged since the 1990s. The fundamental causes of these political manoeuvres can be traced both to factional struggles for power and the nature of the Islamic Republic's constitution.

> 'Presidential and legislative elections [in Iran] from the 1990s until 2017 had encouraged hopes of political, social, and economic reform, providing an arena for the expression of grievances and for the struggle to address them.'

The Islamic Republic is a constitutional hybrid, consisting of republican and Islamic revolutionary institutions. Since 1989 the republican institutions consist of the Majles (the lower house of parliament), the presidency, and local government councils. The holders of these positions are directly elected by the people.

The Islamic revolutionary institutions comprise:

a. The Leader of the Revolution (commonly known in English as the Supreme Leader), who may only be a grand ayatollah with deep knowledge of 'political and social issues'. His wide-ranging powers include: delineation and supervision of the regime's general policies, appointment of members to the Guardians Council, head of the Judiciary and national radio and television, supreme commander of the armed forces (and appointment and dismissal of all heads of military forces (including the Revolutionary Guards), control over intelligence and security organisations, and dismissal of the president on national security grounds following a vote in the Majles or conviction by the Supreme Court.

b. The Guardians Council (the upper house of parliament) defends the regime's Islamic character. Six of its members are chosen by the Leader and six by the Majles. It can veto laws passed by the Majles that it determines do not meet Islamic criteria. Article 99 states that it has the responsibility 'for the supervision of elections to the presidency, Majles, and any consultation of popular opinion and referenda'. In 1991 the Guardian Council, with Khamenei's backing, gave itself the power to vet all candidates for elections, including to the Assembly of Experts—the clerical body nominally charged with choosing the Leader of the Revolution.

c. The Revolutionary Guards protect the Islamic institutions and the revolution's goals. Since the 1990s the Revolutionary Guards have greatly expanded their political and economic reach.

d. Other armed forces, including special anti-riot police, undercover armed forces, Bassij armed militia and Moral Police Patrols.

Yet the republican institutions have substantial constitutional powers. The Majles, which cannot be dissolved, drafts, and passes legislation, ratifies treaties, approves state-of-emergency measures and the budget, and can impeach ministers. Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolutionary leader and founder of the Islamic Republic, had an ambiguous position regarding the Majles and the republican institutions. He stressed that the Majles was the source of all state authority, yet in 1988 he allowed for changes that would give his successor near absolute power.

The constitution is ambiguous in other ways. It emphasises that sovereignty is in God's hands, but also states that the Majles is the trustee of that sovereignty. The presidency, primarily ceremonial until 1989, became the head of the executive branch and the highest official post after that of the Leader. While the president (with his cabinet) is responsible for implementing the constitution and directing the executive, he is not allowed to touch on matters concerning the Leader and cannot overrule decisions made by the Islamic institutions. While he is the head of the National Security Council, the body that coordinates policies on defence, foreign affairs, and intelligence, he cannot implement such policies without approval from the Leader and the Islamic institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards.

This hybrid system originated in the revolutionary movement headed by Khomeini that overthrew the shah. To unite the movement, Khomeini modified his ideas about Islamic government and proclaimed that the revolution's goal was the establishment of an Islamic Republic, without articulating the link between these two concepts. His slogan during the post-revolutionary referendum in March 1979 on the future form of government was 'The Islamic Republic, Nothing More, Nothing Less'. For some, Khomeini meant genuine republicanism, others envisaged Islamism and the forced creation from above of an ideal Islamic society. 98% of the electorate voted in favour of this Islamic Republic. While the constitution that resulted from this gave priority to the Islamic institutions, it also left enough space for the rapid expansion of electoral politics after the death of Khomeini in 1989.

Khomeini's successor was Ali Khamenei, who remains the Leader. Khamenei has always lacked the ideological and charismatic authority enjoyed by Khomeini, and hence has a weaker grip over political competition between factions. Khamenei was succeeded as president by Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, a well-known revolutionary figure, and a longstanding confidant of Khomeini.

Electoral competition emerged during Rafsanjani's two terms, as growing domestic and foreign policy differences between the president and Khamenei spread from competition within the elite into electoral politics. As Rafsanjani was increasingly assailed and blocked by the Islamic institutions and their supporters in the Majles, his own supporters established the Kargozaran Party—the first genuine political party in the Islamic Republic. As Rafsanjani's second and constitutionally mandated final term drew to an end, the conflicts between him and Khamenei became fully reflected in the 1997 presidential election.

There were two main candidates in that election. Mohammad Reza Khatami represented a continuation of Rafsanjani's policies, emphasizing the need for change, and an enlarged role for the people and republication institutions. He was supported by moderate and leftist groups. His opponent, the conservative Nategh Nouri—then-Majles speaker—was implicitly supported by Khamenei and the Islamic institutions and rightist groups.

To the shock of the conservatives, Khatami won 69% of the vote with a turnout of 80%, about thirty points higher than the average for prior presidential elections. His victory was a rejection of the conservative agenda, a sign of growing social, political, and economic discontent, and an implicit defeat for Khamenei. This set off a rapid intensification of factional and electoral battles, the mobilisation of Islamic institutions under Khamenei's control to contain reformism, and Khatami's attempts to expand the rights of the republican institutions and the power of the people. The surprise result also initiated a turn to violence by some groups attached to the Islamic institutions to combat the growing electoral appeal of Khatami and his political allies.

Khamenei deployed the Islamic institutions to defeat Khatami's reformist project. Exemplifying this defeat was the Guardian Council's veto of Khatami's 2003 legislation, passed by the reformist-majority Majles; the latter aimed to strip the Guardian Council of its responsibility to vet candidates, and give the president more power to implement the constitution. Khatami came under intense attack for violating both Khomeini's goals and Islam itself, and efforts at reform stalled during the remaining two years of his presidency. The Guardian Council banned reformist and moderate candidates from running in Majles elections in 2004, when conservatives regained a majority.

The 2005 presidential election was won by the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His victory was due to three factors. He was supported by Khamenei and the Islamic institutions at the national and local levels, including national radio and television. He projected an image of a populist fighting for the rights of the masses and against both the corrupt establishment and upper socio-economic classes linked to Rafsanjani and Khatami, offering sound economic management and moderation on social issues, such as the hijab. Ahmadinejad also benefited from disarray among reformist groups, who fielded five candidates, including Rafsanjani himself. Rafsanjani led the first electoral round, dividing the majority reformist and moderate bloc and allowing Ahmadinejad to come in second and enter the final round. Ahmadinejad won the run-off thanks to a drop in participation and the unwillingness of many to vote for Rafsanjani given the battering his reputation endured during the Khatami years in the reformist press. Khamenei achieved a conservative dominated Majles and presidency.

The re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009 was accompanied by massive countrywide demonstrations against electoral fraud. The losing candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, prime minister during the Iran-Iraq War, had been shielded at the time by Khomeini from periodic attacks by the then President Khamenei. During the 2009 election, Khamenei dropped the mirage of a leader hovering above factional politics and openly identified with the views of Ahmadinejad. This did not prevent Ahmadinejad from overt disagreement with the Leader during his second presidential term. A constant theme in the Islamic Republic, from 1989 to Raisi's election in 2017, was the growing tension between elected presidents enjoying a degree of public support, and the authoritarian Khamenei, unaccountable to the public, and relying on the Islamic institutions and force to implement his will.

Khamenei sought to manage this tension in the 2013 presidential elections by allowing a moderate, Hassan Rouhani, to run against the extreme rightist Saeed Jalili, his preferred candidate. Rouhani was close to Rafsanjani, but had a much lower political profile, while Rafsanjani himself was banned from running. Low voter turnout was in prospect, which had benefited conservative candidates in prior elections under the Islamic Republic. But Rafsanjani and Khatami mobilized their supporters behind Rouhani; fearful of a repetition of the demonstrations of 2009-2010, the Islamic institutions did not interfere with Rouhani's victory in the first round. Rouhani's achievements in office, including the 2015 nuclear agreement and the relaxation of social restrictions, made him a popular figure and thus not easily controllable. Khamenei tried and failed to deny him a second term by choosing Ebrahim Raisi as his opponent in the 2017 presidential elections. Rouhani was helped by Raisi's reputation for involvement in executions in the 1980s and for arresting and convicting people, in particular fellow clerics, who opposed his views.

'The prospects for collective action in resisting the Putin government are currently poor. The segment of Russia's contemporary middle class that is linked with the state has so far given its support to authoritarianism, and official attempts to mobilise opinion in favour of the war have drawn large crowds.'

By the time of the 2021 presidential elections, Khamenei and the Islamic institutions had decided to ensure a victory for Raisi. Several factors appeared to drive this decision. First, electoral competition continued to threaten the power and position of the Leader and the Islamic institutions. Second, Khamenei wanted to unleash a cultural revolution to reverse the legacy of the Khatami and Rouhani presidencies. There was to be a return to social restrictions, and the Islamisation of society and education. Third, Khamenei wanted to ensure a smooth succession to the Leadership position after his death. To manage a victory for Raisi, the Guardian Council banned from running all reform-minded or moderate candidates with any degree of national name recognition and popularity. This included the well-known rightist Ali Larijani (Majles speaker), once top nuclear negotiator and head of National Iranian Radio and Television. There was limited popular support for Raisi, and voter turnout fell to 48%, a 25-point drop from the previous election.

The elimination of electoral competition in the Islamic Republic focused growing popular discontent on to the Islamic institutions. Presidential and legislative elections from the 1990s until 2017 had encouraged hopes of political, social, and economic reform, providing an arena for the expression of grievances and for the struggle to address them. Electoral competition therefore served as a buffer between the people and popular discontent, on the one hand, and the Islamic revolutionary institutions, on the other. Its removal exposed the Islamic Republic to a profound crisis in its authority, exemplified by countrywide demonstrations in late 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini in custody for not properly wearing a hijab, and the subsequent brutal suppression.

5. Russia: The Historical Legacies of Tsarist Social Divisions and Challenges to Autocracy

Professor Tomila Lankina

The minimal requirements for open, competitive politics—including the right to vote, the right of politicians to compete for support, the availability of different sources of information, and free and fair electoral processes—appeared only briefly in Russia in the 1990s, between the fall of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of President Putin's increasingly autocratic rule. As suppression of dissent under Putin has tightened, it becomes harder to assess whether there is a widespread unwillingness, rooted in Russian society, to challenge authoritarian forms of government, or to gauge the extent of opposition that has been silenced by the growing personal risk of speaking out.

There is a discernible link between one aspect of the structure of Russian society and the practice of democratic politics, highlighted by a recent research project into the historical legacy of the urban middle class in imperial Russia.[9] This research demonstrates positive correlations between the presence of middle-class citizens in urban areas of late imperial Russia—measured by data on social structure from the first census of 1897—and measures of competitive politics during the relatively open first round of the Russian presidential election of 1996.

The social structure of imperial Russia was organised in estates (*sosloviye*), as a pyramid: the nobility, clergy, *meschane*, and peasantry. At the apex was a small minority of nobility and clergy, accounting for about two percent of the population. Ranking below them were urban commoners, including the estate called *meshchane* – referring to town dwellers (merchants and artisans)—many of whom were joining the modern professional and entrepreneurial classes; around 10% of the population. The nobility, clergy, and *meschane* were educated, aspired for the education of their children and were active participants in often dense networks of civil society organisations in the cities and towns where they lived. The massive base of the Tsarist social pyramid was formed by the peasantry, most of whom were illiterate. This social structure remained broadly intact until the Russian revolution in 1917.

Contrary to a significant proportion of the historiography of the Russian revolution and its aftermath, the values of Russia's small entrepreneurial and professional class—comprised of the better-educated estates of nobility, clergy, the urban merchants and *meshchane*—were passed on to descendants through the upheaval of revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union.[10] The Revolution and its aftermath did not mark a complete break with the past. The culture and independent attitudes of the *meshchane* and merchants, as well as of the small estates of the clergy and aristocracy of imperial Russia, lived on; many of them became professionals in the new Soviet Union. Their descendants survived alongside the members of a new segment of the Soviet middle class that grew with, and depended on, the expanded functions of the state. In this sense, there was a 'two-pronged' middle class in the Soviet Union.

Traces of this heritage of an independently minded middle-class culture can be picked up in the workings of Russia's new but short-lived competitive politics of the 1990s. These were detected by mapping districts of Tsarist Russia (excluding Moscow and St Petersburg) on to the electoral districts of contemporary Russia, applying metrics of the extent of electoral

competition for the first round of the 1996 presidential election, in which there were ten registered candidates. The metrics of electoral competition were the effective number of candidates (ENC), varying with the number of candidates receiving a percentage of the vote—the ENC is higher when a larger number of candidates each received a significant share of votes—and an index of democratic competition (IDC), which combined voter turnout with the share of votes for each candidate except for the candidate with the largest share.[11] A further metric of the extent of electoral competitiveness was applied, using the 1999 Russian regional press freedom index, compiled by the Institute of Public Expertise.

The historical presence of *meshchane* at the end of the 19th century—the largest of the better-educated estates—was associated with these metrics of democratic competitiveness in the 1996 presidential election, nearly one hundred years later. These findings were confirmed using data from the highly contested 1995 parliamentary elections. No such robust association can be traced when analysing the data against overall levels of education, suggesting that the evolution of a state-dependent middle class during the Soviet era did not have the same impact on enduring political attitudes, evidenced by wider participation and candidate choice.

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The Soviet regime did not produce the extent of rupture with the past that is often assumed. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, liberally minded individuals and young professionals left Russia. The prospects for collective action in resisting the Putin government are currently poor. The segment of Russia's contemporary middle class that is linked with the state has so far given its support to authoritarianism, and official attempts to mobilise opinion in favour of the war have drawn large crowds. The 'systemic' opposition parties—those parliamentary parties positioned as opposition parties but usually backing the government—have also supported the invasion of Ukraine.

Over the years, Russians did not hesitate to take to the streets. Resistance to government policies is evident where the interests of particular groups are severely impacted by government policy. Throughout 2022, protests against the military draft broke out in ethnic regions that have supplied a large share of soldiers for the front. In 2018 there were widespread protests against planned reforms to pensions. But the 2024 presidential election will offer no real choice for voters, and many of the government's most vocal opponents have left the country.

Further comment

While much of the old intelligentsia certainly survived the revolution, educated people did get opportunities within the Soviet state, blurring the distinction between the old and new (professional and state-dependent) middle class. The old estates system had changed significantly by 1900, when Russia was no longer a feudal society. Not all continuities from imperial Russia were favourable to democratic engagement: Tsarist officers also survived to serve in the Red Army, and many descendants of the White Russian emigration are supportive of Putin. While there was a vibrant civil society across Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this cannot be assumed to be sympathetic to values supportive of democracy; on the contrary, civil society organisations and leaders inclined towards fascism as they pushed back against the Soviet state.

The absence of public challenge against autocracy in Russia may be linked to attitudes towards the state. In the early 2000s, when Ukrainian citizens were asked by polling organisations about the source of national sovereignty, the majority replied that this is properly located in the people of Ukraine. In a 2005 poll of Russian citizens by Levada, asking the same question, the majority responded that the source of sovereignty in Russia is the head of state.[12] In contrast to Iran, for example, there is deep respect from Russians for the state.

6. Concluding Observations

Succession is a major challenge for personalised electoral authoritarian regimes (Turkey and, in due course, India), as it is for political systems where electoral competition has been almost extinguished (Russia). For opposition parties and coalitions that have not prevailed against skilled leaders like Erdogan and Modi, the eventual need for succession may offer a fresh opportunity to compete for power and potentially restore elements of competitive politics (media freedom, de-politicised judiciary, rights of minorities) that have been lost.

Opposition parties and leaders face growing obstacles where the basis for electoral competition is eroded. Their prospects are constrained by the use of law—charges of sedition and treason, arrest and imprisonment of leaders and campaigners on corruption charges—and by skewed media ownership, with most media controlled by allies of the incumbent. The task is made more complex by incumbents' skilful leveraging of social divides, and their enhanced ability in an age of social media to distract attention and shift the agenda. As the Russian example demonstrates, the rapid modernisation and urbanisation processes of the 20th century did not obliterate the social structures and divides of the past. In present-day autocracies, incumbents exploit the vulnerabilities of citizens employed in bloated public sectors, with state pressures to conform. Many citizens in precarious jobs or state dependent occupations are vulnerable to electoral manipulations and payoffs. The merging of party bureaucracy with state functions further entrenches incumbent political parties, giving a significant portion of the population a stake in retaining the status quo.

Among the challenges that opposition parties face is the need for deeper coordination to avoid fragmentation; an open acknowledgement of the importance of connecting with the emotions of voters, and a greater concern for addressing the concerns of voters remote from the issues that preoccupy elites.

Endnotes

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