

Electoral Reforms of Post Soviet Russia

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Abstract

The Russian Federation carries with itself the legacy of administration and working system of the earlier Soviet Union. There was no scope for the reforms under the Tsarist Russia and even under the Soviet Union which was governed by the Controlled mechanisms. However the paper highlights few changes made by the Constitution as far as electoral system is concerned. Further, the process of disintegration led to the transformation of the entire system of governance which had brought multiple reforms. The researcher has categorized the reforms under various leadership of the Russian Federation. Major electoral reforms are listed down which had played a very crucial role since the disintegration of the USSR. To develop a well system of administration for any state after its painful collapse it takes time. However with the introduction of such reforms it will certainly help Russia to fill the loopholes within their internal system. It is a typical electoral system that the Russian government had developed to suit its own political interests.

Keywords – Constitution, Reforms, Disintegration, System, Leadership,

Introduction

The Russian Federation, being a successor of the Soviet Union carries the legacy of the administration and the political system existing under the Soviet Union. The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (the R.S.F.S.R.) was ruled by the controlled state system of Communist ideology which does not provide any scope for the conducting reforms. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Tsarist regime concentrated powers into their own hands. In such system where power is centralized, bringing reforms becomes very difficult task. However, with the disintegration of USSR in 1991, reforms were brought in multiple areas within the various bodies of government. The period of 1991 has witnessed the transformation of the earlier system.

Electoral system under the USSR and the Role of the Constitution

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics came into existence on 30th December, 1922 with the unification of republics. "There were elections, regularly and with some grandeur. However, everything was really controlled by the Communist Party - the only allowed party in the USSR - including candidates for these elected offices." This electoral system was continued for long time under the name of populist support. They called it as a true democracy against the western model of democracy where it was believed that the candidate from the Communist Party represents the interest of the people at their fullest capacity. The elections used to happen in such a way where the people had really no choices. They had to vote only a single candidate who belonged to the CPSU. As the communist party does not allowed the existence of the other parties there were no real choices for candidates on the ballot sheets. However, one thing has to be noted that for non participation in the election process there were no punishment unlike the North Korea.

Under the totalitarian system of the Soviet Union everything was structured in a way that they come under the higher authority. Politburo of the CPSU central committee bears the highest authority to decide everything about the elections of USSR. The Soviets were subordinate to the executive committees and these executive committees were subordinate to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The General Secretary, served as ex officio chairman of the Politburo. The decisions of the Politburo were bounded on all. It was a de facto body of decision making.

The political system of USSR and the constitutions existed during Soviet period with the divisions of powers and authorities of different bodies and also on the electoral reforms. But in reality powers were exercised by CPSU. The 1918 Constitution mentioned the right to vote as the fundamental political right under article 4 without any discrimination for those who have completed their 18 years. The next constitution is known as constitution of USSR which came in to existence in January 1924 consisted of two parts, twelve chapters and seventy two articles. Article 14 and 15 of this constitution deals with the representative parts of the elections. Article 134 to 142 of the 1936 Stalin's constitution provides the provisions for electoral system. It includes the representation at lower level bodies. Later the 1977 Brezhnev constitution leans towards more reforms in terms of allotting freedoms to its citizens. Also in the painful and chaotic process of disintegration of Soviet Union the constitution has gone through many amendments. With all these earlier documents the new Constitution was adopted by national referendum on 12th December, 1993 which is the most long lived document after the 1936 constitution for Russian Federation.

Disintegration Process and the Electoral System

The USSR was collapsed in 1991 and gave birth to 15 independent republics. This process was in a way heart breaking for the superpower which brought much turmoil. The dissolution of the

Soviet Union led to the transformation of earlier system and brought drastic changes within it. "There was extended debates and disagreements among the delegates, much of it were televised. Boris Yeltsin blasted party privileges and paralysis of reforms while Yegor Ligachev zealously defended it. It was high political drama not witnessed before." Though there were some positive steps arising they were not successful because of the chaotic conditions and internal changes. As the Russian Federation succeeded the USSR from 1991, things have changed with adoption of New Constitution.

Major Electoral Reforms in Russia

The following electoral reforms are mentioned during different leadership that the Russia has witnessed.

Reforms under Gorbachev Period

The various reforms which were introduced by the Mikhail Gorbachev in the year 1985 popularly known as the Perestroika and Glasnost left very deep impacts on the minds of people. These are the reforms that focused on restructuring and openness of the economy and political structure for the efficient functioning of the system. "All the institutional and economic reforms that were launched during the Perestroika period were, in some way or other, concerned with the place and role of the CPSU in the Soviet system." These reforms were an indication of an effort of Gorbachev to curtail the unlimited powers of CPSU and transform Russia in to a democratic discourse where the people will have their own say.

Since 1980s only there were emergence of many political parties though directly not taking participation in the elections but parties in different forms of groups have emerged. Various reforms were introduced to provide for competitive elections as many parties were registered, secret ballots for local and regional party offices were introduced with limitations of terms. All these attempts showcase to undermine the old and corrupt party system of appointment.

Reforms during Yeltsin Period

The phase of post Soviet period is remarkably known as a process of building of democracy. This is the period that witnessed the new constitution for Russian Federation in 1993 with major shifts as compared to the earlier constitutions. The first electoral reform was executed on 1993 by introducing the maximization of pro-presidential political forces among the Duma deputies. It supported the multiparty elections for new bicameral parliament. The percentage of the parties participating in the parliamentary elections was raised from 5 to 7. Article 81 of the new Russian constitution states that, elections shall be held direct, free, equal and secret. "The new constitution clearly stated that post-communist Russia was firmly committed to political diversity and a multi-party system". This was the case but still the voters were not allowed to vote against all political parties.

Though there is an increase in the numbers of political parties in post soviet period in the involvement of the political process, they remained insignificant in creating a strong opposition. The new constitution of Russia had increased the powers of president which is famously known as a super presidential form of government. So the powers of the president received more weight than the process of direct elections and representations of the people. Under the name of carrying forward liberal and market oriented reforms and promotion of democracy Boris Yeltsin decentralized the powers to the regional governors which resulted in to creation of a group of oligarchs and inefficiency of reforms. The ideals and cherished values were promised by the new president were not successfully implemented according to the Western model of development. None the less he introduced the Russian style of democracy under which regular elections took place with existence of multi party system. This period is very crucial in terms of managing its administration and maintaining its efficiency. For unsuccessful implementations of new reforms the situation, political ideology of the head of the state and the diverse issues and role of the governmental officials matters a lot. Thing that did not work under Yeltsin were reformed soon under the strong leadership of Vladimir Putin.

Reforms under Vladimir Putin

Putin tried to rectify the chaotic situation left by Yeltsin. He recentralized major powers from regional governors to the centre. "The new system, which the Central Election Commission is expected to unveil in the next several weeks, replaces a system of strict party-list voting." The reforms conducted in 2002 to 2003 played a very crucial role in terms of bringing new framework laws for the election of president and parliament. The second phase of reforms was started in 2004 where Putin proposed election for Duma by proportional representation. Again in his next term, president Putin signed the new law of mixed-member-majoritarian (mmm), electorate system. In the new millennium the electoral system of Russian federation seems to be more governed and regulated also at the same time competitive. But the area of criticism of this system is attached always with the absence of strong opposition role which weakened the real liberty and no checks and balances over the exercise of powers.

Major Electoral Reforms in Russia

- ✓ Since the process of disintegration of USSR the initial reform was carried out by introducing of a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system at the first election to the State Duma. In this reform half of the parliamentary seats were to be distributed in accordance with a single member plurality system and other half of the seats were distributed in accordance with the proportional representation system. It was a successfully passed reform and the implemented one to in 1993.
- ✓ In 1995 another reform was carried out which failed. But the initiatives were taken by introducing the proposal of the president to change the balance between the SMP (single

member plurality) and the PR (proportional representation). It was demanding the ratio of numbers of candidates 300-150 instead of 225-225. But it was failed.

- ✓ In 2002 there is an increase of the PR electoral threshold from 5 to 7 percent.
- ✓ In 2005 Russia replaced the MMM system by the closed list PR one. With the same it increased the electoral threshold from 5 to 7 percent since 2007 election.
- ✓ In 2014 Russia reintroduced the MMM system, applied until 2003, with equal balance between the SMP and the PR mandates. Also it lowered the threshold form 7 to 5 applied to the PR system

Conclusion

The electoral reforms which were initiated witnessed between both regime liberalization and regime closure. "Instead of an emphasis on elections and discussions of abstract monetarist schemes, it is important to develop respect for law and order, create a working system of separated and mutually controlling powers, and guarantees real independence of the courts and the mass media. At the same time, the system of government should be strengthened, so that decisions of all branches and levels of government are respected both by individual citizens and various groups."

It can be traced that for any system to evolve, its background and foundation played very crucial role in deciding the structure and ways of governance of that particular system. The USSR which was ruled by the controlled system under Communist regime did not immediately welcome the reforms or couldn't imbibe the reforms in to its electoral system. Efforts have been made under the Gorbachev and Yeltsin's period however due to internal situation did not implement the reforms. Also there is a personality cult which indicates the differences of opinions and methodologies in working styles especially between Yeltsin and Putin. With this changed scenario it is still remarkable that effective leadership has brought down the changes in evolving their own way of democratic model as a result of these electoral reforms. Though some loopholes do exists within the system, there are some tremendous developments also which are far better than the earlier period. It is a typical electoral system that the Russian government had developed to suit its own political interests.

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