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Opposition Political Parties in Authoritarian Contexts

Briefing note 2. Election Boycotts

Tamar Tkemaladze and Nicholas Duncan Ross

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Introduction

2024 will feature a record number of elections, covering an unprecedented number of the world's population. Most of these elections will take place in closed or closing political systems, where the machinery of competitive multiparty elections is undermined by manipulation of the media, electoral process, judiciary, and security services, as well as extrajudicial political violence. Flawed electoral processes allow aspiring authoritarians to claim a certain amount of (domestic and international) legitimacy, to “buy in” loyal opposition parties, and to release some of the tension felt by opposition forces.

Given these constraints, we might wonder why political parties confronted with these conditions bother to participate in compromised elections at all. The alternative to participating in an election perceived as fundamentally unfair is, of course, a boycott: declared non-participation in the election by candidates, political parties, and their constituents (who decline to cast their votes on the day). Boycotts aim to deprive authoritarian elections of legitimacy, to protect opposition candidates and supporters from the dangers of openly contesting state power, and to avoid wasting scarce resources on unwinnable campaigns.

On the other hand, boycotts entail significant risks. Boycotts very often increase internal fragmentation or factionalism – the decision to boycott is generally controversial and introduces new tensions into a political party or coalition. This can be exacerbated by another effect of boycotts, which dramatically restrict constituency building for most political parties (discussed below). It is common for election boycotts to cover only some party representatives, with others choosing to run despite the boycott, including as independents. For the opposition as a whole, this can easily produce a worst-case scenario, where too many candidates participate to plausibly delegitimize the election process, but too few voters show up to meaningfully endorse these candidates.

There is also often a degree of uncertainty about just how compromised a political process is. Recent elections have seen major gains by opposition parties against some of the standard bearers for electoral autocracy: Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Victor Orban's Fidesz. In India, general elections in April and May saw a significant swing against the BJP, in favor of the Indian National Congress. In Hungary, local elections in June saw the newly-formed Respect and Freedom (Tisza) party win as many seats in the Budapest Assembly as Fidesz. These types of results illustrate the continued power of elections as a vehicle for resisting shifts toward authoritarianism.

This briefing note presents the strategic considerations of opposition political parties and movements confronting elections they expect will fall short of “free and fair” competition. It focuses on the question of whether to boycott, assessing the advantages and risks of this strategy.

Arguments in favour of boycotts

The obvious injustice of competing in an election in an authoritarian political system often leads opposition political parties to consider boycotting these processes. Boycotts are intended to deprive authoritarian elections of domestic and international legitimacy. They can also function as a risk-minimisation strategy: they protect opposition candidates and supporters from the dangers of declaring their opposition and raising their public profile; they also avoid wasting scarce resources on unwinnable campaigns.

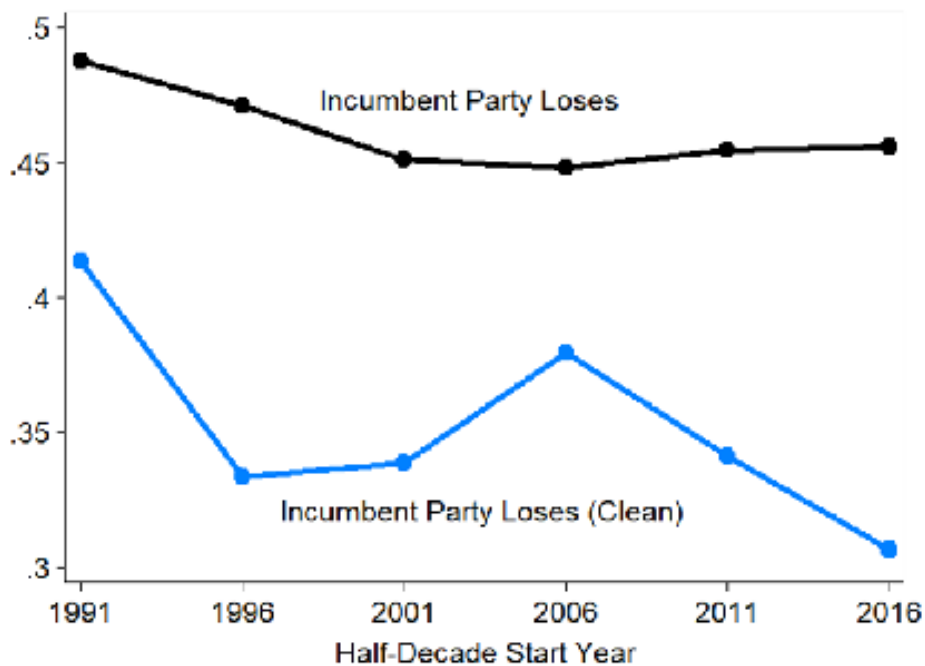
Boycotts can have maximalist goals (e.g. regime change), or incremental goals (e.g. demanding electoral liberalisation). They are used to encourage lower turnout, incite post-election protests, or “buy time” to build a coalition and rally behind one candidate in subsequent elections. Sometimes a boycott has been employed as leverage in negotiations. For example, the Inkatha Freedom party (a Zulu nationalist party) threatened to boycott the transition away from apartheid, as a way of protesting the African National Congress’ dominance of the process. Their boycott strategy was successful in winning concessions they favoured – devolution of power to the regions – in exchange for their participation in the 1994 elections.

Lessons Learned from the history of boycotts:

- Partial boycotts of elections have been more common than total boycotts, largely as a result of disunity and fragmentation in the opposition.
- Boycotts have been more widespread during presidential (rather than parliamentary) elections.
- There is a difference in the nature of coordination in presidential and parliamentary elections. Cooperation between different parts of the opposition is less common during presidential elections, even when the opposition has the common objective of regime change. (Presidential races are inherently winner-takes-all.)
- Larger opposition parties have a better chance to withstand the negative consequences of a boycott. (This encourages smaller parties to participate in elections, however compromised.)

An effective boycott can be thought of as the “shadow” of a successful election strategy and involves similar challenges to election campaigns: movement building, popular mobilisation, fundraising, and a communications strategy. Where political parties have recourse to meaningful power outside of electoral institutions, usually through a connection to either armed actors, a powerful trade union movement, or social movements, they can sometimes incorporate an election boycott into a much larger strategy to provoke a crisis (e.g. boycotts supported by mass protests, or a general strike) and force the government to make concessions. This type of mobilisation seems to be becoming a more important part of the political landscape. The chart below illustrates the gap between “clean” transfers of power, where the incumbent party has lost a vote and stepped aside without incident, and all transfers of power, which includes situations where the incumbent party has been forced to step aside by mass mobilisation, boycotts, strikes etc. As the chart illustrates (Figure 1), this type of mobilisation is the only thing holding back democratic backsliding (the rate at which incumbent parties step aside has decreased somewhat since the 1990s, but not much, while the rate at which incumbents cleanly relinquish their power has decreased markedly).

Figure 1. Incumbent party losses since 1991¹



¹ Figure 1 uses the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset.

Arguments against boycotts

While boycotts are generally effective at protecting individual candidates against reprisal they can be disastrous for political parties as institutions. This is because there are strong incentives for minor parties and unknown candidates to run in the face of a boycott. Parties and candidates who do participate, even in a flawed election, will have a far better chance of winning seats. Even limited electoral success typically offers some access to power, including opportunities to influence legislation and the spending of state revenues. This type of success allows parties and candidates to build constituency relationships and raise their profile.

Unless opposition parties combine a boycott with an effective mobilisation strategy, they risk being “off stage” for the duration of the forum they have boycotted (e.g. a term of the legislature). This may not undermine the opposition as a whole, but does generally undermine the position of boycotting opposition parties. Boycotts also increase internal fragmentation or factionalism in parties. The decision to boycott is generally controversial, and introduces new tensions into a political party or coalition. This can be exacerbated by another effect of boycotts, which dramatically restrict constituency building for most political parties (discussed below). It is common for election boycotts to cover only some party representatives, with others choosing to run despite the boycott, including as independents. For the opposition as a whole, this can easily produce a worst-case scenario, where too many candidates participate to plausibly delegitimize the election process, but too few voters show up to meaningfully endorse these candidates.