Inclusive Peace
setting change in motion

Opposition Political Parties in Authoritarian Contexts

Briefing note 3. Movement-building

Tamar Tkemaladze and Nicholas Duncan Ross

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Introduction

One major political change of the last few decades has been declining rates of political participation, including voter turnout at elections and the share of the population belonging to a political party. Accompanying this shift, has been the transformation or replacement of mass political parties into (or by) so-called "professional parties", which swap the broad based membership of "mass parties" for greater numbers of salaried staff and consultants, often alongside a more hierarchical approach to decision-making, and a greater emphasis on media and communications.

While this phenomenon is usually discussed in the context of consolidated democracies, it may also help to explain the shrinking size of civil resistance movements in electoral autocracies[1] (and those autocracies that allow political parties). Inclusive Peace's partners among opposition political parties in authoritarian systems are generally organised in forms resembling modern professional parties. They feature strong communications teams, relatively hierarchical leadership and decision-making, few or no members, limited relationships with other social institutions (churches, labour unions, professional associations, universities, etc.), and an emphasis on mass (media) communication over mobilisation through communities or by volunteers or members. These types of party-form have distinct advantages, but they also typically struggle to sustain mobilisation over the long term. In reaction to this, some of our partners in democratic opposition movements have responded to the weaknesses of professional parties by investing in building political movements.

Strengths and weaknesses of professional parties

Professional parties in autocracies offer distinct advantages. They can be quickly established to take advantage of democratic "windows of opportunity". Electoral autocracies are characterised by periods of liberalisation and crackdown. It is difficult to sustain an effective party structure through periods of closure in order to be prepared to capitalise on democratic openings. Professional parties can be set up quickly, drawing on prominent personalities and expanded by hiring full-time staff with private sector skillsets (public relations, communications, information technology, etc.). Whereas mass parties may take decades to become viable electoral machines, professional parties can be established in months.

As with professional parties in consolidated democracies, the popularity of this type of party structure in autocracies is probably as much a mirror of the decline in other forms of associational life, as it is a strategic decision among equally plausible pathways. As people increasingly engage with the world through media, rather than through face-to-face forms of community and association, this is also

1 According to Chenoweth's article "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance", 2020., the size of civil resistance campaigns has started to decline since the 2000s.

how they form their political affiliations. Professional parties are adapted to this feature of modern life: they are communications specialists, and at home in media spaces.

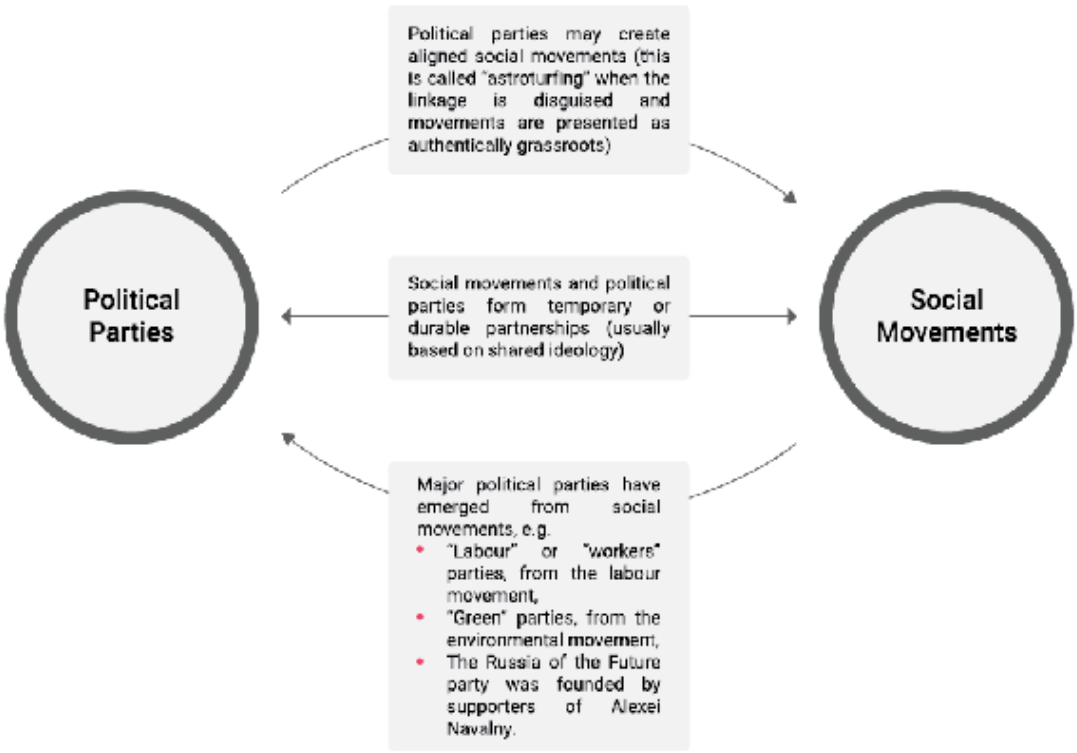
On the other hand, professional parties have weaknesses. Because they typically lack a large and committed social base, they are reactive and dependent on political opportunities outside their control (e.g. they are good at winning regularly scheduled elections, but struggle to exert proactive pressure through strikes, protest actions, directing substantial financial resources). Professional parties also typically struggle to sustain mobilisation over the long term. This leaves them poorly suited to driving political events, which requires the ability to mobilise significant numbers of supporters. Typically, they must wait for opportunities to present themselves (e.g. an economic crisis, a stolen election, the succession of an autocratic leader). Finally, professional parties may struggle to form broader ideologically-motivated coalitions – never an easy task, but made more difficult by personalistic forms of politics. Some of our partners in democratic opposition movements have responded to the weaknesses of professional parties by investing in building (or building partnerships with) political movements, in effect creating something like a hybrid professional-mass party. This is not an easy task to undertake, even in states that permit significant freedom of association.

Movement building by political parties

Building links with movement politics

Probably the most famous definition of social movements comes from Charles Tilly and Stanley Tarrow: a movement is "[i] a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, [ii] based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities". Tilly and Tarrow argue that it's important to distinguish between social movements (in the sense expressed by part [i] of the definition above, as campaigns) and the social bases that make these movements possible (i.e. part [ii] of the definition above). Social bases can be organic communities, such as a village of farmers, a religious congregation, or an urban neighbourhood, or voluntary associations based on shared interest or ideology, as with a trade union. Social movements occur when bases are mobilised into campaigns (repeated, deliberate, and with a clear identification of who or what is responsible for making change) of claim making.

Figure 1. Relationships between social movements and political parties



Social movements (unlike political parties) don't aspire to hold power directly through openly holding state offices. Instead, they aim to influence political issues from outside formal politics. To achieve political change, they generally[2] require a collaborative relationship with political parties (to incorporate their goals in legislation or policy). These collaborative relationships can occur when parties and movements share goals, where parties and movements share membership (e.g. labour unions might have seats on important committees in a Labour Party), or where political parties attempt to create allied social movements to achieve pre-existing goals (e.g. by mobilising their supporters). These relationships can also change over time.

In highly restrictive political settings, mobilising social movements is much more difficult. Particularly, now that most civil resistance movements rely on mass demonstrations (as opposed to, e.g., strikes, sabotage, blockades and other forms of direct action).[3] Political entrepreneurs in these settings have succeeded by working in secret, mobilising away from the "core" of the state (in neglected or frontier communities), forming "apolitical" associations focused on community aid or service delivery, and most of all by playing the long game. The history of

2 With very few exceptions, e.g. situations where a political change depends on an executive decision made by someone with no party affiliation (like a personalist dictator).

3 Chenoweth, 2020. Binnendijk & Marovic, 2006

social movements very clearly illustrates the contingency and uncertainty of success, as well as the importance of being ready when moments of opportunity arrive.

Opposition party coalitions

Coalitions among opposition political parties are another form of movement building. Highly restrictive political environments tend to keep opposition parties small and fragmented. Because there is very little power to be gained by joining together,[4] parties have little incentive to make the difficult compromises involved in forming coalitions. Instead, we mostly see shallow (in the sense that they are easy to unwind) and very broad-based "anti-regime" or "pro-democracy" coalitions formed in advance of unfair elections. Unfair elections (which are usually anticipated and prepared for long before electoral falsification takes place) are pivotal moments for political mobilisation and the formation of coalitions.[5]

A crucial element of opposition strategies is the presence of a widely supported plan, which on the one hand, contributes to achieving unity in leadership, and on the other hand, enables decentralised tactical steps. This indicates that opposition parties need to strike a balance between centralised efforts and decentralised organisation. While a unified front enables coordination, the authoritarian incumbent can arrest or co-opt opposition leaders. Decentralised actions, on the other hand, are useful to withstand repressive measures but they may lead to fragmented and ad hoc engagements without long-term impact. To this end, successful opposition often takes the form of coalition parties, which bring together different constituencies that can maintain their distinct identity within the movement.[6] Nevertheless, due to political competition or past legacy, political actors may struggle to build a coalition and generate actionable strategies prior to mass demonstrations, which damages movement resilience under increasing state pressure.[7]

There are three main sources of international support for the opposition in autocracies: states, international non-state actors (INGOs, religious or business actors), and diasporas. External help provided to political parties has been

4 "Little to be gained" in the sense that for any increment in coalition size, there will not be a corresponding increment in power, because members of the coalition held little or no institutional power to begin with (in the same way that 1*0 = 2*0).
There is always the possibility of completely overthrowing the old regime and implementing genuinely competitive elections.

5 Kuntz & Thompson, 2005

6 Bunce and Wolchik, 2013

7 Comparative examples from Eastern Europe are usually used as an illustration of the effectiveness of mass demonstrations against authoritarian rule but an effect of street protests may also be exaggerated by opposition politicians.

correlated with the success of nonviolent resistance against autocracies.[8] The support involves funding, training, and building networks. Transnational networks have proven instrumental in facilitating the dissemination of effective practices and knowledge across borders. External actors may also support dialogue within society, considering the dialogue process enables subsequent democratic political life. However, there are also substantial risks associated with external support. Autocracies usually portray movement actors as foreign agents, which may harm movement legitimacy (well-known examples include Russia, Belarus, Iran, etc.). Democracy assistance actors can help by setting clear criteria and prerequisites for support, as movements in closed political systems face heightened risks if assistance they expected fails to materialise.

8 Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011