

ANALYSING THE SOVIET DEMOCRATIC CONCEPT AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS (1917-1991)

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Abstract

It is an established fact that Russians and Russia have had a chequered history in Europe and Asia. It is equally important to note that the Russian Federation is the only country in the world that belongs to two continents- Europe and Asia with its peculiar history, culture and socio-political system. This paper attempts to explore the democratic concept and political institutions of Soviet Russia from 1917 when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics popularly referred to as the USSR was established to 1991 when it collapsed as a subject of international law and geo-political reality. The work adopts historical approach. Relevant data; especially on Russian political institutions were sourced from bibliographic, archival materials as well as credible internet sources. The work concludes that whichever position taken by scholars of political history on the brand of political institutions and the practice of democracy in the hey days of the USSR, the system worked perfectly to suit the peculiar Russian culture in that the Russians preferred a strong personality at the centre of their political life rather than strong political institutions.

Key Words: Soviet Union, Russia, Democracy, Political Institutions, Revolution

Introduction

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics popularly referred to as the USSR was a federation of 15 republics and as a country, it occupied 224 million square kilometers. It had a population of over 280 million made up of more than 100 nationalities. Though it could be claimed that the USSR was the successor state to the Russian Empire, the political structure since the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917 changed radically between October 1917 and December 1991 when the USSR broke up as a federation into 15 sovereign states. Perhaps, it would be necessary to state that Russia did not have any democratic organ of government during the reign of the Tsars. What could be regarded as a germ of democracy before 1917 was an institution of the Duma which was forced on Nicholas II in 1906 after the defeat in the Far East and the revolution of 1905. Anderson (1972:120) (Ademakinwa 2001:90-91) corroborated this by saying that The Duma then “was a weak body elected by complicated system of mainly indirect voting” The Duma had no real legislative power as it merely acted in an advisory capacity to the Tsars. This modicum of democracy was eventually frustrated out of existence by reactionary elements around the Tsar before World War I in 1914.

However, after the Great October Revolution of 1917, the entrenchment of socialist democratic institutions became the major concern of the revolutionaries. At very beginning, Vladimir Ilyanov Lenin conceived of proletariat democracy whereby the soviets (workers' councils) elected in Russian factories would become the forum for workers to communicate economic grievances to the management. This work attempts to explore the political

architecture brought about by the successful dethronement of Tsarist regime in imperial Russia. It concludes that the separate evolution of the Russian state marked it out in Europe with its peculiar political arrangement.

Prelude to the Revolution

The USSR, as observed by Odunuga Segun (1988:37) “was a peculiar country with a religion derived from a system that was Greek and considerable early civilisation from Constantinople, Russia, or to be exact, the first Russian state based in Kiev, was physically and culturally isolated from Western Europe”. The invasion by the Tatars in 1240 put an end to Kiev as the capital of Russia and it was left to the principalities of the northern forests of Russia to reassemble, resettle and finally re-establish Russian authority on the native soil after about three centuries. At the ascension of Peter the Great, Russia was still a country without an outlet to the sea and it took series of wars to open routes to the south and north. To improve his nation's position on the seas, Peter sought to gain more maritime outlets. His only outlet at the time was the White Sea at Arkhangelsk. The Baltic Sea was at the time controlled by Sweden in the north, while the Black Sea was controlled by the Ottoman Empire in the south. Peter attempted to acquire control of the Black Sea; to do so he would have to expel the Tatars from the surrounding areas. As part of an agreement with Poland which ceded Kiev to Russia, Peter was forced to wage war against the Crimean Khan and against the Khan's overlord, the Ottoman Sultan. Peter's primary objective became the capture of the Ottoman fortress of Azov, near the Don River. In the summer of 1695 Peter organised the Azov campaigns to take the fortress, but his attempts ended in failure. Peter returned to Moscow in November of that year and began building a large navy. He launched about thirty ships against the Ottomans in 1696, capturing Azov in July of that year. On 12 September 1698, Peter officially founded the first Russian Navy base, Taganrog.

The latter route led to the foundation of St. Petersburg which became the capital of Russia after Peter transferred from Moscow. The expansion to the east in the 17th and 18th centuries brought the Russians to the Pacific. (Wikipedia)

As a result of the isolation from Europe, Russia had to stick to its distinctive administrative tradition. The Duma of Boyars that was intended to serve as a body of advisers to the Tsar became highly politicised and this led to the assembly of nobles becoming turbulent and even disobedient to the Tsar. Since the Tsar regarded himself as an autocrat he could not see his powers challenged by a group of people selected by him to serve in advisory capacity. Therefore, Ivan IV instituted in opposition to the Boyars Council a wider assembly called the Zemsky Sobor. The Sobor included members of The Duma, the ecclesiastical synod, representatives of the Tsar's administration as well as merchants who were fiscal agents of the Tsar. During the transitional period between *the time of trouble*—a period of disputed successions and foreign interventions and the rise of the house of Romanov, the Sobor gained temporary importance and something of the character of a parliament in which the peasantry was represented. But by the time the second Romanov came to the throne, the Zemsky Sobor did not meet regularly and for the last 22 years of Aleksei's rule (1645-1676) and the first six years of his successor's the Sobor was not convened.

Peter the Great convoked the Sobor in 1698 to pass judgment on his sister, Sophia, who served as the regent, for plotting rebellion against him. His reforms later put an end to both the Sobor and the Duma. Peter's westernisation policy brought a lot of changes especially administrative efficiency to Russia. As a result he introduced a Senate.

Local administration was vested in the governors appointed by the Tsar to represent his authority in the provinces—(*the gubernias*) and though the nobles were expected to serve as

adviser to these governors the power the governors themselves wielded prevented them from accepting the role the nobles were to play.

Later periods of Tsarist rule saw administrative changes reflecting the various structures, political and social, in Russia. The Mir, the Volost (assembly of villages) and the Zemstvos (land assembles) emerged at various stages and they were to serve as political institutions to help the Tsar over an empire that had grown vast with diverse peoples and cultures.

The disturbances of 1905 as an aftermath of industrial unrest coordinated by the Soviet (council) of Workers Deputies led Russia to accept for the first time liberal democracy as known in the Western Europe. The State Duma was created and the Council of Ministers was reconstituted into something like a cabinet with its own chairman whose position and function were comparable to those of a prime minister. This opened the prospect of political life and political parties emerged on the Russian scene. The Tsar then promised a Duma directly elected, though on a restricted franchise. The Duma was allowed a say in the laws made by the Tsar though he had the power of a veto in case The Duma withheld its sanction. A Council of State was also set up to serve as a second chamber and it remained a strong though conservative institution.

Between 1906 and 1917 four Dumas were called. The first was for two months in 1906, for a little over four months in 1907, from 1907-1912, and from 1912-1917 when Romanov dynasty fell. Though The Dumas did not control the ministers who were directly responsible to the Tsar they became so powerful that they were able to force ministers to resign and during the 1914-18 war, The Duma was highly critical of maladministration.

This shows that real political life had begun in Russia. But as Derek Scott puts it, "it was late" These factors with others like the breakdown in the transport system and growth of industry combined to bring down the regime in 1917.

The Socialist regime that came to power in November 1917 inherited some of the political institutions established under the Tsar and it only had to introduce its own reforms in the light of the philosophy of life the party preached. Soviet political institutions, like the preceding ones, had to undergo changes. Karl Soviet political thought had to do with the philosophy of Marx, a Rhineland German, who had propounded theories of society. His principal work, *Das Kapital* had a good reception amongst the Russians and it was to this language that the first translation was made. Marx little realised that though his doctrine was based on his thought of German Philosophy and a practical interest in German politics, the Russians would be the first set of people to adapt it to their way of life. In fact, according to Derek Scott, Marx was of the opinion that Russia could not possibly have been of those areas where his idea would triumph. This is, perhaps, one of those human miscalculations that are bound to occur in history in that Marx himself, though thinking of Germany, his nation, at that time blended his theory with elements of French socialism and British economics and the prevailing social conditions in both countries at that time.

Marx held the view that the tools or process used by men at each of the predetermined stages of development (forces of production) in some way enabled the owners of them to make themselves the ruling class, having control of the state, coercive machinery to hold down the opposing classes. Is it only natural to expect that such a class would wish to hold on to this as long as possible but since progress could not be arrested a time would come when the economic process outgrow the social structure and then a revolutionary situation would arise bringing in a new ruling class. That ruling class would be the proletariat "whose means of livelihood according to Engels "depends entirely upon the sale of its labour" (Alexander N. Yakovlev et al, 2002:89)

Marxism-Leninism is the philosophy on which the Soviet Union based its political structure. The penetration of the theories of Karl Marx into Russia helped in determining the political direction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) which was formed in

1898 and in which Vladimir Ilyich Lenin popularly known as V.I Lenin played a leading role. When at the Second Congress of the Party held in London in 1903 a split occurred, Lenin became the leader of a wing of the Party-Bolshevik (the Majority). The other wing-Menshevik (the Minority) was to gradually drift away.

Lenin from that moment started to propound his own theories based on Marxist lines but on the background of Russia's social, cultural and economic conditions. In his view, one class could carry out two revolutions without necessarily having long intervals in-between. He went on to justify an alliance between the workers (the proletariat) and the peasants. This he reflected in his pamphlet: ***Two tactics of Social Democracy*** which was published in August, 1905. According to Lenin "the proletariat must complete the democratic revolution by uniting to itself the mass of the peasantry in order to crush by force the opposition of the autocracy, and to paralyse the inability of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat must complete the socialist revolution by uniting to itself the mass of semi-proletarian elements in the population in order to break by force the opposition of the bourgeoisie and to paralyse the instability of the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie".

But since the revolution of 1905 failed to give power to the bourgeoisie, the socialist revolution had to wait. When eventually the Tsar was forced to abdicate in March 1917 and a provisional government took effective control of state affairs, it was felt that the socialist revolution was on its way.

Marxists regarded the bourgeois revolution as a progressive step, a democratic step forward. Prince Lvov who was the first head of the Provisional Government was the leader of the Union of Zemstvos and Kerensky who succeeded him in July of that year was a representative of the Social Revolutionaries. The Menshevik who succeeded him in July of that year was a representative of the Social Revolutionaries. The Menshevik wing of the RSDLP joined the Provisional Government in May like other small parties did but Lenin's Bolshevik wing did not. Their plan was for a greater democracy, hence their advocacy of "All power to the Soviets" in the period that the Bolsheviks thought that the Provisional Government had deviated from the path the masses wanted it to follow. Kerensky and his men were continuing the war which was quite unpopular in the country and which even the Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies had opposed.

But if Marxists, including Lenin, thought that the bourgeois revolution was democratic, why then did they plan its overthrow? The answer lies in the difference between socialist democracy as defined by its proponents and bourgeois. Socialism transfers the centre of gravity from formal democratic rights and freedom to their practical exercise and the creation of such social, economic and political conditions as would ensure citizens the real opportunity to exercise their state-given rights and actively participate in its affairs.

Notions of Democracy

This is where the Soviet and Western notions of democracy were at variance because of their application. The term democracy assumes the participation of the people, the masses, in the government of their countries, and quite often the definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln as "the government of the people, by the people, for the people" has always been quoted or evoked to prove that the participation of the people in electing representatives to parliaments is what democracy means. But apart from these occasional exercises which take place about once in every four years, there is no other proof that the masses really participate in decision-making let alone function in government and its agencies. Of course, it would be naïve to think that the entire masses of a given country would in one way or the other function in government or any of its agencies but it could be stressed that in many of the so called Western 'democracies' the masses have not been able to put their real representatives on any higher organ of state power. Not even at the lower tier of government. What they

have often been called upon to do at best is to choose from two or more people chosen by their respective political parties to fight for a particular seat-parliamentary, presidential, and the like. Therefore, it could be said that the word 'democracy' as used in the West does not convey its true meaning, while freedom could only be used in a relative sense.

The West with its system of parliamentary democracy has always termed itself the "free world"-a world of free enterprise, a world that is free to choose its representatives from at least two parties, a world that allows its citizens an amount of freedom which, in its eyes, did not exist on the eastern side of Europe, especially since the notion in the West was that no freedom existed in any socialist country.

In the opinion of Karl Marx, such freedom is "the right to enjoy and dispose of one's fortune at will, without taking thought of other men or for society; it is the right of selfishness, it is this individual freedom, with its practical application, which lies at the basis of bourgeois society. It makes each person regard his fellowman not as the realisation but as the restriction of his freedom" It could only mean then that bourgeois democracy is based on this.

Lincoln's definition of democracy, we would admit, it applied in its entirety and its full significance and scope, would give us an appropriate description of true democracy. It would determine its content but not the form. But it would indicate that the form must proceed from the content. Therefore, a "government of the people, by the people" would mean a government in which at least the majority of the people would have a say and in which the real representatives of the people would take part in the interest of the people. After all, as Henri Lefebvre puts it, "nothing great can be achieved without the people and still less in opposition to them. An ambitious man, a usurper, or a cloudier of issues may turn one section of the people against the other and as fascism did, employ for the oppression of the working class other classes which nevertheless belong to the people (some of the middle-classes, small shopkeepers, the unemployed, etc. sooner or later, history judges and decides-history, which is not abstract entity, but the movement of the masses, and the peoples who fight on, following the lead of those in whom they recognise themselves, and abandon to destruction those who have misled them" Democracy according to Bookchin, Murray (1999:155) "is a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally-either directly or indirectly through elected representatives-in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. It encompasses social, religious, cultural, ethnic and racial equality, justice, and liberty"

The concept of democracy today depends on the relative use of the word. In fact, it depends on the political and social structure of a particular society. The Westminster idea of it is expressed in the British parliamentary system which claims to be the rule of the majority. Discussing this and democracy generally, the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell wrote "the Anglo-Saxon definition of democracy is that it consists in the rule of the majority; the Russian view is that it consists in the interest of the majority, these interests being determined in accordance with Marxist political philosophy". Again here the rule of the majority is subject to further examination. Do we by this mean the majority in the parliament or in the country as a whole? This arises in that in some countries that practice parliamentary system (the Westminster type) the total number of votes cast for the opposition sometimes surpasses that for the government party. But since the system allows for elections on single-constituency basis, the party with greater number of legislators retains power. On the other hand, the interest of the majority could only mean the interest of the greater part of the populace-the masses.

The main criticism against East European countries whose system differed from that of the West was that they were autocratic since there were only the communist parties and since the system was allegedly so monolithic that only 'party' candidates contested elections without the electorate having the choice of alternative candidates where party candidates were not

satisfactory. This assertion must have prompted Alexandra Denton (2006:2) to say that “according to those who espouse that Russian political culture has seen more continuity than change, there are two strands to this legacy – the first is the centuries’ long experience of autocratic tsarist rule and the second is the nature of the Soviet regime. It has even been claimed that “true” democracy has not yet taken hold in Russia because the people themselves.....are “co-conspirators” in the rejection of democratic values and practices. This approach holds that, due to historical experience, Russians do not possess an understanding of democratic practices”. A look at the Soviet power structure and the parliamentary system would go a long way to throw some light on what really went on behind the so-called “iron curtain”

Perhaps, it might help to start by explaining that the word “Soviet” in its original form means “council” and therefore, the “Soviet System might be constructed to mean a system of councils or consultation if the other meaning “advice” is applied” (Chubarov, Alexander (2001:67). The present day meaning of the word “Soviet” has been rendered politically neutral but in pre-revolutionary Russia, the Soviets in existence at that time-the St. Petersburg Soviet, the Moscow Soviet and those in other towns-were those in which workers’ deputies first took their seats. In fact, they could be regarded as Soviets of Workers’ Deputies which were in contradistinction to any state organisation like The State Duma or the Council of State over which the Tsar had direct control.

The Duma itself had been born of revolution following the disastrous outcome of the Russo-Japanese War and the labour and agrarian disturbances that swept the country in 1905. As a result of the social unrest and the economic discontent the Tsar in his Imperial Manifesto of 17 October, 1905, established The Duma as a legislative assembly elected by representatives of various social groups and it became the second chamber of Russian parliament if it could be called so. But The Duma could be dissolved anytime the Tsar was displeased with its activities and this he did twice-1906 and 1907.

On the contrary, the Soviets had representatives of all the existing political parties and chose their leaders themselves. Lenin was later to describe the Soviet as the “Russian form of the proletarian dictatorship” (Bacon, E & Wyman, M, 2006:93). By 1917, the system had allowed the Soviets gained ground not only among the workers, but also in the army, navy and among the peasantry. Therefore, when the Tsar was stripped of his imperial powers and forced to abdicate in March 1917, the Bolshevik Party came out with the Slogan “all power to the Soviets” which meant that Lvov’s and later Kerensky’s provisional Government was not representative of the people. Lenin himself had said so when he wrote: “Power to the Soviets” which means radically reshaping the entire old State apparatus--that bureaucratic apparatus which hampers everything democratic. It means removing this apparatus and substituting it with a new popular one. That is truly democratic apparatus of the Soviets comprising organised and armed majority of the people-the warders, soldiers and peasants. It means allowing the majority of the people initiative and independence.

Conclusion

It could be observed from our essay that regardless of the position and prejudices of the Western world, the defunct USSR, in its own way, practiced and observed the principles and tenets of democracy. And with this, the country was firmly held together. Besides, the separate socio-cultural development of the Russians accounted for its own brand of democracy. This is in tandem with Alexander, J (2000:12) position when he said that “it is often asserted that a political system – and a democratic system in particular – needs “to be consistent with the political values of its people” It is on record that the Russians are always in favour of a strong individual as their leader. Contemporary Russian society has found these attributes in their pioneer president, Boris Yeltsin and the incumbent, Vladimir Putin. It

is equally worthy of note that the Russian Federation remains the only country in the world where an individual can rule the country as long as the people want. This system, though very strange, the Russian Federation has endured unprecedented socio-economic development to the consternation of its ardent critics.

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