

INSIGHT

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Riding Yeltsin's coattails

By Kenneth Janda

By crushing a parliamentary rebellion last month, President Boris Yeltsin survived his toughest test yet. But his future will rest largely on his ability to build a political organization as tough as he is.

He needs a political party, which is what Yeltsin lacked to back his programs in the parliament he dissolved on Sept. 21. For a few days afterwards, it seemed that Yeltsin might play his cards in a way that would guarantee him strong party backing in a new legislature. However, he and his advisers apparently failed to understand some basic dynamics of democratic politics, and Yeltsin eventually had to call out the army to win the hand.

The problem is this: Yeltsin desperately needs a political party to support him in Parliament but either does not realize that or does not understand how to create one. Of course, he had been elected president in June 1991, with 57 percent of the vote on his own — without a political party. Having just dramatically resigned from the Communist Party and riding a crest of personal popularity, Yeltsin at the time saw no need to create a party. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that most of the Russian people were (and still are) suspicious of political parties. Perhaps Yeltsin reasoned that if he could win election by himself, he could govern by himself.

In a democratic government, however, legislative politics is inevitably party politics. Passing legislation in an independent parliament requires getting support from a majority of deputies, which is easier to do if one can count on support of a sizable voting block, even if not a majority. Yeltsin's advisers recognized this, and there were efforts, intensified during the past spring and summer, to create a presidential party. But I fear that his advisers, or Yeltsin himself, did not appreciate the close connection between electoral systems and the formation of political parties.

If they had, then they would not have ignored the golden opportunity presented by the dissolution of the parliament and the demands of his parliamentary opposition. The facts are these: Immediately on dissolving Parliament, Yeltsin prescribed that new parliamentary elections would be held in December. Soon afterward, he surprisingly (and reassuringly) announced that presidential elections would be held in June. The parliamentary opposition countered that they might reach



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a compromise with Yeltsin if he would agree to run for president also in December. Unfortunately, Yeltsin refused. I say unfortunately, because that was Yeltsin's opportunity to create his political party. Most deputies in Parliament were opposed to new elections because (like legislators everywhere) they feared losing the perquisites of office through defeat. One way that many could have improved their chance for re-election was to campaign on a platform of support for Boris Yeltsin — who would be running in the same election. Although Yeltsin is no longer as popular as he was before, he almost certainly would have won. In the process, he would have carried into Parliament on his coattails a block of deputies who chose to run on his ticket. They would have become publicly identified with Yeltsin, who could have (and should have) organized them into a national party. Yeltsin then could have counted on this core of legislators to support his programs in the next parliament. By running for re-election in a separate vote in June, Yeltsin will continue to divorce his fate and future from that of the legislators.

Certainly Yeltsin would take a risk in running for election in December, but elections are always risky, even for presidents who had enjoyed great popularity. (Ask George Bush.) A June election runs a risk as well — and it doesn't offer the same potential for presidential coattails to sweep committed deputies into office. Yeltsin and his advisers probably did not foresee the possibilities in a simultaneous election simply because they are new to democratic politics.

In particular, they lack an intimate understanding of the link between parties and elections. Electoral laws and election systems are the most important factors in determining the number and type of political parties that form in a country. Russians will soon find this out; they simply need more experience with elections and parties. I hope that the democratic reforms continue long enough for them to gain that experience.

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