

Coalition of the Willing Modernizers

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By Konstantin Sonin

It is always nice and easy to talk about modernization when it remains in the abstract. But the moment this conversation turns more concrete, the subject becomes very unpleasant. The reason is that major power struggles lie behind any modernization plan.

In practice, a struggle for power means building a coalition. Any society consists of individual citizens and all have their own particular interests. For a politician to push through change of any type, he must find a way to unite these interests toward a common goal, persuade them to accept compromises and shake thousands of hands along the way.

In democracies, that process is clearly visible. U.S. President Barack Obama's health care reforms are a good example. It took two years to form a coalition to finally pass the legislation. It doesn't matter if the planned reforms are good or bad. Any change to the status quo requires building a degree of cooperation between all parties interested in seeing a change.

Strangely enough, the same mechanism applies to authoritarian regimes. Look at Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler or Fidel Castro in situations where they had to make changes to the status quo. Even in order to carry out his purges, Stalin had to constantly make sure that the coalition supporting him was more powerful than the one that wanted to preserve the status quo. To that end, Stalin had to meet daily with secret police leader Nikolai Yezhov and establish relations with new officials who had received their promotions after their bosses were executed.

"Modernization" is a common unifying theme for building coalitions. If it is in great demand, somebody will use that demand as a means of gaining power. But modernization is impossible without a physical change of those in power. It would be logical, for example, for President Dmitry Medvedev to operate under the slogan of modernization in order to grab power from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. If Medvedev desires greater power, he needs a coalition, and a coalition can only be rallied around a theme.

But it is rare that leaders are able to build coalitions from the top. Politicians must be able to understand what ordinary citizens and the ruling elite desire. The type of coalition is determined by public demand. The degree to which a politician is successful in exploiting the existing demand depends on his personal qualities and a certain degree of luck.

Medvedev has yet to form such a coalition. But why should it be easy for him when it is difficult for opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov or Vladimir Milov? On a personal level, they are no less capable than Medvedev as politicians, but they have so far been unable to find the words and themes that could help unite the people and bring them to power.

It would seem that there is no public demand for modernization — or to be more precise, the demand is small at best. But there is some good news. First, there does not seem to be any demand for anything bad and, second, the demand for improvements has a tendency to build over time as difficulties and problems mount.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School in Moscow and a columnist for Vedomosti.