



## Parties of Power as Roadblocks to Democracy

### The cases of Ukraine and Egypt

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#### Introduction

Political parties are the backbone of any functioning representative democracy. They are the agents that compete in the political arena for public office by offering programmatic alternatives to voters. It is not surprising therefore that an analysis of countries that have failed to democratise shows political parties suffering from a severe pathology that renders them weak institutions. In both the eastern and the southern neighbourhood of the EU, a type of party has emerged, the *'party of power'* characterised by its dependence on the state, the absence of ideology and the linkage with specific sectoral groups. Examples of such parties can be found in Ukraine during the reign of President Kuchma and in present-day Egypt.

The ideological weakness of parties of power and their dependence on the state is both a symptom and a cause of the failure of democratic consolidation. Because they prevent the emergence of a multi-party system based on competing ideological-programmatic currents, these parties and their legacies should be seen as an important stumbling block in the transition towards and consolidation of democracy. This paper attempts a summary analysis of the phenomena, suggesting that an alternative model of party development is required in order for democracy to take hold in the eastern and southern neighbourhood of the EU.

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Both Ukraine and Egypt are going through critical political transformations. Whilst in post-Orange revolution Ukraine, the pro-Yushchenko coalition is now attempting to reproduce its victory over Kuchma's oligarchs in the 2006 parliamentary election, there are signs in Egypt that rising domestic and international pressures for change are finally being met by government efforts to reform the political system. To be sure, serious differences exist between these two countries in the depth and pace of political change. In the aftermath of the Orange revolution, Ukraine is taking its first tentative steps towards democratic consolidation with crucial constitutional issues being discussed. During the Orange revolution, profound changes were introduced to the institutional environment, affecting the electoral system and the balance between presidential and parliamentary powers. Because these changes were imposed by the outgoing elite, the current government questions their legitimacy and is presently discussing how to settle these crucial questions (see Yushchenko, 2005). The ruling elite's constitutional choices will be of paramount importance for the development of political parties and, ultimately for the democratisation of Ukraine.

In Egypt, by contrast, mounting pressures for change on the eve of crucial presidential and parliamentary election this year have so far failed to produce real changes to the political status quo. Nevertheless, it is clear that domestic demands for reform, which have gained momentum in recent months, probably pose the most serious political challenge to the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime since the early 1990s (see Shahin, 2005). It is interesting to note in this regard that these pressures for reform do not primarily emanate from the legalised political opposition which, being co-opted into the regime, carries little pressure potential to challenge the established order. Instead – and this is a new phenomena in Egyptian politics – they emanate from a rising number of grass-roots reform movements and a more assertive and emboldened Muslim Brotherhood. Being united in their demands for immediate political reforms, these movements have in fact managed to challenge the authorities by mobilising a seemingly apolitical public and by organising a vast number of rallies and demonstrations across the entire country.

Despite these differences between the two countries in the pace of reform, there is little doubt that the success or failure of democratic change in Egypt and Ukraine will largely hinge on the capacity of the political elites to shed the legacy of parties of power. In Ukraine this implies that the pro-Yushchenko coalition must go beyond creating a vote-winning coalition by laying the foundations of a centre-right party. In fact, if the current elite in power takes seriously the task of building an independent, centre-right party before the next election, Ukrainian democracy seems to have a chance. Otherwise, the patronage system set up by Kuchma could be reproduced again.

For Egypt, this means that the authorities ought to do two things. First, they need to abolish all legal restrictions that have hitherto stifled the autonomy of political parties and their development into programmatic mass-based organisations. Second, and setting an example for other parties in the country, the Egyptian authorities must also cut the lifeline with the National Democratic Party (NDP), enabling the party to mutate into a truly autonomous and programmatic political force that can survive under competitive conditions.

Surely, from the regime's perspective, both of these measures are highly problematic, as they shake the very foundations on which the authoritarian system has been built. With rising domestic and international pressures for reform, however, it is all too clear that the logic of repression and patronage, so successfully employed by the Egyptian authorities during the 1980s and 1990s, will in the end have to give way to a logic of pluralism and competition. Consequentially, there are two ways forward for the NDP: it can either strive for greater autonomy from the state and stand a chance of survival, or, on failing to do so, crumble with the authoritarian regime that it has sustained over the past 20 years.

### The Concept of 'Parties of Power'

Parties of power develop from a ruling elite's drive to maintain control over the state by means other than programmatic competition, normally in situations of unconsolidated democracy or of limited pluralism. Being created from above, these parties are not meant to become autonomous political forces in their own right, but are utilised by the ruling elites as instruments of co-optation, sometimes even coercion and political hegemony. To begin with, they simply serve the regime to sustain a network of patronage relationships with the major socio-political, economic and administrative actors of the country. By using the patronage networks, in fact, the regime seeks to ensure its very survival by granting these actors access to the spoils system of the state in return for their complacency concerning the existing order. What is more, such ruling parties also serve to provide regime-supportive majorities in the major elected institutions of the state. Since we are dealing with transitional regimes, all of which have introduced regimes, some form of multi-party elections, the control of the ruling elite in

parliament is no longer guaranteed. Facilitating the formation of crushing majorities in parliament, ruling parties hence serve to sustain the political hegemony of the ruling elite in parliament and government.

Despite their instrumental value within the political system, and possibly even because of that, there is little interest on the part of the ruling elites to develop these parties of power into fully institutionalised organisations with a clear ideological profile. The dependency of the party on the state would be broken by the formation of a ruling party with a will and a power base of its own. The oxygen of these parties of power is hence their relationship with the state. In fact, being an exceptionally weak institution, such parties will most likely disintegrate once deprived of their connection with the state.

And herein lies the paradox. A truly competitive multi-party system cannot emerge within a system of parties of power, which unbalances the electoral game in favour of single party or a set of political parties that thrive on the spoils of the state. For democracy to take hold, these parties must be de-linked from the state and put on equal par with the other political forces in the country. In concrete terms, this means that political leaders have to yield to a different logic of party-building that undercuts dependency on the state and creates links with civil society through programmatic choices (see Randall & Svasand, 2002). At the same time they ought to facilitate the development of parties based on distinct ideological profiles to undercut existing patronage patterns and to facilitate electoral competition around clear programmatic alternatives. Only once these preconditions are met will parties make the transition to a different model and contribute to a further democratisation of the political system.

### Yushchenko's Ukraine

The failure to consolidate democracy in Ukraine during Kuchma's period in office owed much to the system of parties of power, characterised by a strong alliance of the political elites with common economic interests, who increasingly took control of political power in Ukraine during the 1990s (see Kubicek, 2001). With few exceptions, political parties in Ukraine represented networks of economic client-patron relations rather than expressing wider social and economic options for ruling the country.

After the election of Kuchma to the presidency in 1994, the strengthening of the grip of several economic groups over the legislative, executive and judicial branches accelerated. Kuchma's ruling Party of the Regions was little else than an assembly of clans and oligarchs who used state structures to further their vested interests. In parallel, the 1996 Constitutional Amendments pursued by Kuchma strengthened the presidency by transferring political powers to the office from the parliament. The formal concentration of powers by Kuchma was also accompanied by the strengthening of the control of the executive power over the judicial and legislative branches

as well as the local state authorities (see Sushko & Lisnychuk, 2005). The hopes of further democratisation raised by Kuchma's rise to power in the 1994 presidential election were dashed when the regime tightened its oligarchic control over the state and increased its authoritarian practices.

The December 2004 mobilisation of masses to protest against electoral fraud in Independence Square was essentially a rebellion of civil society against the oligarchs' control and the elite's authoritarianism. The promise of a break with the past regime symbolised by the Orange revolution will only be attained, however, when deep institutional reform takes place. Political parties are arguably central elements of such a transformation, and the new political elites should seriously attempt to break the legacy of parties of power. A first step is the strengthening of political parties by cutting their dependency on an illicit relationship with the state and strengthening their relationship with the voters through programmatic appeal. The strengthening of political parties is a building block for the strengthening of parliament and, ultimately, a more democratic form of control of political power.

Arguably, the Orange revolution might have provided the institutional incentives for such a move. Indeed, a side-effect of the revolution, even if opposed by Yushchenko, was a constitutional settlement limiting the extremely wide powers gained by the President in the 1996 constitutional reform. Although the legitimacy of the constitutional settlement is being now questioned for it was achieved under the threat of the use of force against the masses in Independence Square, the settlement still created a benchmark in transferring some of the powers back to the parliament. Although Yushchenko might try to limit the loss of presidential powers to the parliament implied in the package of constitutional reform, the reinforcement of the parliament's powers appears inevitable. Although uncertain as to its scope and timing, the strengthening of the parliament will be an incentive to the creation of parties based on programmatic lines.

But even if a more powerful parliament increases the value of political parties, a more powerful parliament will not lead automatically to the emergence of independent, programmatic parties and a structured party system. For this to happen, it is crucial that political leaders commit to take ideological coherence as their primary criteria for party-building, even when this implies a short-term loss of votes and office control. For the time being, Yushchenko's priorities seem focused on creating a winning coalition for the 2006 parliamentary elections, with the institutionalisation of a party relegated to second place. When in early 2005, Yushchenko announced the formation of a new party, many expected it to be based on the parliamentary bloc created in 2001 to support his candidacy, the 'Our Ukraine'. However, it soon became clear that the new party would be based on the public movement 'For Ukraine! For Yushchenko!' and would mainly include members of the new government, while on the whole the parties participating in the 'Our Ukraine'

parliamentary bloc remained outside. When the founding congress of the 'Our Ukraine' People's Union (NSNU) took place in early April 2005, observers raised concerns in the political community that a new party of power was being created (see Maksymiuk, 2005).

For the moment the new 'Our Ukraine' shows a number of features that augur poorly for its institutionalisation as a programmatic party. First, being based on a social movement rather than a structured party or coalition of parties makes the process of creating a coherent internal structure much harder to achieve and therefore decreases its chances of long-term survival (see Randall & Svasand, 2002 and Sushko & Lisnychuk, 2005). Second, the only ideological inheritance that the new party received from the popular movement supporting Yushchenko is rather vague: a commitment to democracy, opposition to the outgoing authoritarian regime and a commitment to the European route. Such commitments do not appear to give any decisive direction to the government in terms of political and economic decisions, which means that these identities do not provide sufficient glue and the parties do not survive much beyond the first set of elections (see Randall & Svasand, 2002). Political ideologies should thus provide more convincing indications regarding political and economic policies, such as positions on nationality or the size of the public sector.

Obviously, ideological identities are not built instantaneously; one short-cut to ideological definition is thus the assimilation of existing parties' ideological profiles by integrating parties with established profiles. At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether the original 'Our Ukraine' (Viktor Pynzenyk's former 'Our Ukraine' party) and the parties descending from the Ukrainian Popular Movement (Rukh) – Yuriy Kostenko's Ukrainian People's Party and Boris Tarasiuk's People's Rukh of Ukraine – will eventually be included on the NSNU's party lists as the Parliamentary elections of 2006 approach. Their exclusion would worsen the chances of consolidating the NSNU as a centre-right party.

The descendents of Rukh would help build the ideological identity of the new party. Not only were the descendents of the Rukh, Kostenko's People's Party and Tarasiuk's Rukh, instrumental in the unification of the opposition parties behind Yushchenko's presidential candidature, but as the movement that had earlier propelled Ukraine to independence, and the one that is "most rooted in an independent civil society" (Birch, 2000), it carries an important symbolic heritage. Even when attempting a catch-all strategy, the NSNU could define its ideological profile by combining the Rukh's moderate and inclusive nationalism and Yushchenko's moderate economic liberalism in a typical conservative profile.

Yushchenko's electoral coalition with Yulia Tymoshenko's bloc and the Agrarian Party of Volodymyr Lytvyn is advancing, with talks underway on the principles for parity of seats. Unfortunately, this seems to go hand in hand with a disregard for the basic procedures involved in forming a party with coherent structures and

ideology. By relinquishing the party leadership, Yushchenko increased the uncertainty over the party leadership. In his way Yushchenko weakened the identity of the party, with the latest opinion polls showing a decline in the support for the Our Ukraine People's Union (see Yushchenko, 2005).

Summing up, the ruling elite in Ukraine faces crucial decisions concerning the shape of the country's political system. The choice is roughly between a semi-presidential system in which the parliament and parties are strong, and a presidential system where political parties remain dependent on the state. By taking a short-cut to electoral success rather than agreeing on building a single party structure based on a clear-cut ideology, the carriers of the Orange revolution would be reproducing the path taken by Kuchma following the 1994 elections. Circumventing the process of party institutionalisation allows a short-term attitude to the control of political power to dominate, at the expense of strengthening democratic institutions. In the absence of institutionalised political parties, the single-minded logic of political leaders' control over the state institutions that characterised Kuchma's system parties of power could thus prevail. The democratisation of Ukraine is thus at stake.

### Mubarak's Egypt

In many respects, the Egyptian party political scene resembles that of Ukraine prior to the Orange revolution. Here again we come across a system of parties of power, which as elsewhere in the Mashrek region, has prevented the country from developing a functioning multi-party system based on programmatic-ideological competition. At the heart of this system stands the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), which was carved out of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) by President Sadat, when he abolished the single-party state in favour of limited party pluralism in 1977. From the onset, the NDP was not intended to become an autonomous political force in its own right, with a strong organisation and a clear ideological profile. Rather the ruling elite at the time, and President Sadat in particular, wanted to create a party that was subservient to the needs of the government and dependent upon it. Essentially the NDP was to function as an instrument of political hegemony and co-optation, ensuring the regime's political supremacy in parliament and government and facilitating its linkage to the country's major sectoral organisations, such as the trade unions and business associations (see Kassem, 1999 and Nafaa, 1995). In this sense then, the NDP differed little from its predecessor, the ASU, which, under the authoritarian single-party regime of the 1950s and 1960s, had served as a corporatist umbrella organisation, linking all major societal sectors to the state.

To perpetuate the NDP's regime dependence, Sadat, and even more so his successor Mubarak, made sure that the party remained both underfinanced and understaffed and that the appointments of all senior party positions remain the prerogative of the president. Most crucially, both

presidents ensured that the NDP lacks a clear ideological profile and so also an ideologically committed membership base. Indeed, to this day, no serious attempt has been undertaken to unite the party's vastly different ideological currents and fractions under a coherent programme and to build up a membership base that is defined by ideological commitment rather than by access to state patronage. As it stands, the NDP is populated by old Nasserites, market liberals, moderate Islamists, members of the 'parasitic bourgeoisie' and state technocrats, and its programme remains little else than a collection of vaguely formulated principles. In fact, probably the only glue holding together this diverse blend of currents and fractions within the NDP is the dictum of *statism*, i.e. the belief in the legitimacy and continuity of the established order, and with it the party's close ties to the all-powerful Egyptian presidency and the state's spoils and patronage system (see Kassem, 1999).

According to most observers of Egyptian politics, the ideological vagueness of the ruling party is deliberately sustained by the regime for two reasons. First, it is sustained to pre-empt the development of an ideologically committed membership base that could turn the party into a new locus of power with a potential of undermining the supremacy of the Egyptian presidency. Second, this vagueness is also sustained as a means to justify any policy decisions taken by the government, without formally breaching official party doctrine. In other words, the party is being instrumentalised to legitimise *post-factum* the policies pursued by the government (see Kassem, 1999). This means that, contrary to the role of ruling parties in established democracies, the NDP carries little policy-making initiative despite its status as party in government. Here, as elsewhere in the region, policies emanate from the executive, with the parliamentary party functioning as a rubber-stamp institution for policy ratification.

Whilst plaguing its day-to-day operations, the ideological weakness and state dependency of the NDP are probably most noticeable during election times. In most representative democracies, this heightened period of electioneering usually exposes the programmatic-ideological profiles of the parties that vie for the voters' attention and confidence. This is not the case, however, with the NDP and its candidates which, rather than being selected by the party's grass roots, have in the past been handpicked by the president to run for public office. In fact, over the past two decades of multi-party elections, the NDP has rarely produced an election manifesto, outlining the party's policy proposals based on a coherent ideological profile. In the absence of such a profile, the party has instead relied on its linkage with the government in order to attract voters and secure election victory. Amongst other means, this has been done by instructing party candidates and their campaigners to propagate the government's five-year plan, the past achievements of the NDP regime and, most importantly, the direct connection between the party and the president.

In recent years, however, some steps have been undertaken by the NDP to revive the party as a mass-based organisation and to re-assert its position as a prominent player in Egyptian politics. These attempts follow on the heels of the 2000 parliamentary poll, which saw a drastic decline in the electoral fortunes of the NDP. Held under partial judicial supervision, these elections robbed the NDP of a home-grown majority in parliament, which it was only able to salvage by re-admitting those de-selected NDP members who had defied party orders and run as independents. Alarmed by the dire state of the NDP, and particularly by its decreasing credibility as the governing party, the calls for internal reform rapidly gained prominence within party ranks and even amongst the ruling elite.

At the 2002 general party conference, these calls for change eventually culminated in the implementation of a set of internal reforms that were intended to reconnect the party with the Egyptian electorate and to enhance its position within the power structure of the state. Under the direction of Gamal Mubarak, the son of the incumbent president and leader of a reformist camp within the party, several structural changes were introduced to the party statutes. Propagating greater internal democracy, for instance, the party introduced the direct election of its top positions and the grass-roots participation in the selection of candidates for parliamentary elections (see Brownlee, 2002). Under the captivating slogan 'new thinking', the congress also debated and adopted a new programme for the party, which was meant to better reflect the changing socio-economic realities in Egypt. Most crucially, however, attempts were made to reverse the NDP's junior position within the party-government relationship. Realising that a party without a programme and command of government policy could not survive in the long run, Gamal Mubarak, who in 2002 took over the NDP's powerful policy committee, stated clearly:

The NDP is the party that formed this government because it is the party that won the majority of votes in parliamentary elections. This is why the government must be restricted by the party's recommendations, proposals and strategies on socio-economic and political developments in Egypt (see Al-Din, 2002).

That Gamal Mubarak's demands did not entirely fall on deaf ears within the regime became apparent in 2004, when the President formed a new government under Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. As it later transpired, the NDP's policy committee was directly involved in the formation of the new government, nominating a number of crucial cabinet ministers with strong linkages to the younger cadre of the NDP. These included amongst others the Ministers of Higher Education, Youth, Communications and Information Technology as well as the Minister of Industry and Foreign Trade. What is more, not only was the policy committee directly involved in the formation of the cabinet, but immediately after taking office, the new PM also promised to work closely together with the NDP in the development and

implementation of government policy and to hold regular meetings between the party and government to that effect (see Al-Din, 2004 and 2004).

Surely, any move by the NDP to obtain greater policy initiative over the government, as demanded by the young Mubarak and evidenced in recent developments, would constitute a significant step in reducing the party's dependence on the state, and hence a move away from the current system of parties of power. The same can be said about the introduction of greater internal democracy, which could reduce the influence of the executive over the composition of the party leadership and its candidates, and thus increase the overall autonomy of the party.

At this point in time, it remains to be seen whether the recent internal reforms will indeed enhance the NDP's position vis-à-vis the state. In any event it seems fair to say that even if these developments are to stay, many obstacles remain for the party to become a truly autonomous actor with a clear ideological profile. For this to happen, the party must engage in far bolder internal reforms aimed at strengthening its own organisational structure and at clarifying its position within the ideological spectrum. Such reforms must include a proper system of party financing that attempts to reduce the NDP's current dependence on the infrastructure of the state, a clear separation between government and party officials and the development of a membership base that is programmatically and not patronage-oriented. At the same time, of course, the ruling elite must support such developments and put the conditions in place for further internal reforms of the NDP.

Summing up, what are the chances that such reforms are on the cards, and that the system of parties of power will eventually make way for one that is structured around competitive and ideologically-oriented political parties? At present, the dire answer must be 'none', given the regime's unwillingness to significantly alter the political status quo. Indeed, despite a recent string of political reforms, there are few signs that the ruling elite is truly committed to the emergence of a more competitive party system, in which the NDP would have to assume the position of one amongst equals in the electoral game. A case in point is the recent amendment of the Egyptian Constitution, which for the first time in the country's electoral history introduced multi-candidate elections for the presidency. Although initially hailed as a significant step forward towards democracy, it quickly became clear that the amendment was never meant to open the presidency to true contested elections. Having been drafted by an elite unwilling to concede power, the new presidential election law makes it virtually impossible for opposition parties to stage their own candidates and to lead an effective election campaign on an equal par with the ruling NDP.

What is more, it is even debatable whether any transformation of the NDP from a party of power to one of ideology can take place within the confines of a regime whose very existence is based on the fusion of party and

state. In fact, unless the ruling elites are willing to resort again to violent coercion as a means to sustain power, they will require the presence of a timid regime-supportive party that provides the Egyptian regime with the necessary political hegemony in the central institutions of the state. De-linking state and party would hence upset the logic of authoritarianism under conditions of controlled pluralism and most likely lead to the demise of the incumbent regime and certainly to the disintegration of the ruling party.

## Conclusions

As typified by Ukraine and Egypt, most of the semi- or non-democratic countries of the European neighbourhood pretend to offer a degree of political pluralism. The standard is for a plurality of parties to run in national elections and participate in parliamentary sessions. In contrast to fully fledged democracies, however, these electoral rituals have little bearing on the composition of government and its policy output, which remains entirely dominated by the executive institutions.

Parties of power constitute a crucial element of such political order. As discussed above, they function as instruments of co-optation and political hegemony, enabling the ruling elites to sustain their regime without major internal challenges. In so doing, parties of power rob the concept of 'political party' of its traditional meaning in Western democracies. Throughout this paper we argued that the trademarks of these types of parties constitute a serious stumbling block for the development of a multi-party system based on competing ideological currents. For democracy to take hold in the eastern and southern neighbourhood of the EU, it is crucial that the logic of parties of power be replaced by one structured around autonomous and ideologically cohesive parties.

These conclusions have of course significant implications for policy-makers with an interest in promoting democracy in the region. If democratisation is of central concern to the European Neighbourhood Policy, ideological and organisational party-building should be an integral part of its current agenda. Beyond the democratisation of authoritarian regimes, assistance and encouragement should be given to the formation of autonomous and ideologically cohesive political parties. Equally, parties should be encouraged to translate such ideological precepts into coherent policy positions so that in the long run the shift of loyalties from clientelistic practices to programmatic principles can be achieved. Together these changes would surely enhance the nature of multi-party competition and with it the quality of procedural democracy in the region.

Certainly, the regional significance of this analysis of parties of power varies. Where revolutions have already created a more pluralist environment, such as in Ukraine and Georgia, independent political parties will be the cornerstone of a system of democratic institutions. In Ukraine this demands that the Yushchenko elite institutionalises its visions in a political party. However, if

an instrumental attitude towards the parliament and political parties prevails, the Orange revolution could still be remembered as an unfulfilled promise. Indeed the challenges faced by the Yushchenko regime in 2005 and 2006 are paramount: not only to secure electoral victory in the 2006 elections but also to ensure that the strong popular movement taking them to power is not transformed into a simple agent of the state. On the other hand, in those countries under authoritarian government, the only way for the ruling elite to introduce more pluralism without completely losing control is to progressively cut the links between the ruling party and the state. In Egypt and other countries of the southern neighbourhood, reforming the secular ruling parties is crucial as a means of facing Islamic parties in a more pluralist scenario. Indeed, it is only once the ruling parties are taken off the state's life-support that a truly competitive party system can emerge, in which the ideological contest comes to outweigh the importance of patronage and state spoils.

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