

The Khodorkovsky Cancer

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Last week, a political leader who had spent the past seven years in custody was set free. That leader once began a speech with these words: “It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”

Besides the fact that former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky also spent the last seven years in prison, there are few parallels between his situation and that of Myanmar political figure and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the person who spoke those words. The party that Suu Kyi led won a near landslide victory in 1990 elections, and only military force enabled the junta to retain power in Burma (officially renamed Myanmar after the junta gained control) and to arrest the person who should rightfully rule the country. In the case of Russia, everything was just the opposite. The decisive victory for pro-Kremlin parties in the 2003 State Duma elections after Khodorkovsky was arrested in October 2003 laid the foundation for the current vertical power system.

However, Suu Kyi’s words ring just as true for Russia as they do for Myanmar. The show trial against Khodorkovsky is a huge malignant tumor that has crippled the Russian political system. Its metastasis has far more serious consequences than simply the arrest of an

outspoken oligarch and the dismantling and appropriation of Yukos. It set a negative precedent for the courts, which had only just been starting to take shape in the 1990s, by demonstrating that political interference is a natural part of judicial procedure. After two difficult decades of attempting to establish an independent and viable judicial system, we ended up back where we were in 1991 — with the courts serving as an extension of the political leadership's power structure.

The implications for the political system were no less dramatic. Having turned the political dispute with Khodorkovsky into a battle to the death, his opponents turned out to be hostages themselves. In fall 2007, the fear of having to step down from power prompted President Vladimir Putin to deal the final death blow to the system of parliamentary elections, but the natural question arises: Why would Putin need to take such extreme measures to hold on to power if the country he is ruling is democratic?

Putin and the Kremlin's political machine have spent most of its resources in pursuing one goal: the preservation of the status quo. For this reason, personal loyalty to Putin becomes increasingly important with each passing year. Needless to say, any system focused so entirely on maintaining the status quo is hardly capable of initiating a modernization program. Meaningful reforms and progress can only be achieved on the basis of open, democratic social and political institutions, and establishing those would take at least one or two full election cycles — up to a decade.

As with a malignant tumor, the campaign against Khodorkovsky has a malignant effect on the overall political and economic environment in the country. Meaningless statements about conditions under which he might one day be released will do nothing to stop the tumor from spreading even further into Russian governmental institutions.

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