

What Putin Shares With A Middle East Autocrat

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The parallels are eerily striking.

A strong leader with a security background inherits supreme power in a large and strategically important country after years of turmoil and armed conflict leave the nation impoverished and traumatized.

He sets out to impose political stability through tough authoritarian methods by applying selective repression against the opposition, imitating democratic governance and corrupting political institutions.

Relying on foreign revenues, he implements populist economic policies that end deprivation but cannot prevent incomes from stagnating. He tolerates massive corruption within the ruling elites to buy their unquestioned loyalty. He privatizes the political space as his entourage seize the juiciest assets.

He leads a large party of power that invariably wins elections by abusing state resources, denying entry to serious political challengers, fielding "stealth independent candidates" in single-mandate districts and resorting to "magical" vote-counting.

He allowed his security forces to apply calibrated harshness to his opponents so that they do not seek personal revenge against the ruler. Utmost brutality is reserved for fringe extremist groups with selective justice administered by docile courts.

His preferred governing strategy, however, is to demonize the opposition or to make them look pathetic. Character assassination is the weapon of choice. No one is supposed to be able to imagine any of his opponents ever toppling him or being a viable president. All serious alternatives to his rule are forced out of the country, discredited or jailed. He is popularly portrayed as the "last defense against chaos."

He spurns political dialogue with the opposition since it doesn't have "a positive program." Moderate opponents are compromised as they agree to participate in pseudo-democratic institutions. The public at large see politics as too cynical and hopeless to change anything and too boring to draw in large crowds.

For a while, he experiments with leadership succession arrangements to secure a safe retirement but ultimately decides to stay in power indefinitely after his handpicked successor nearly loses a parliamentary election at the helm of the ruling party.

The country is Egypt, and the leader is Hosni Mubarak. His National Democratic Party was dissolved by a court order in April 2011, two months after a popular uprising in Cairo swept Mubarak from power.

For Russia, the perils of the "Mubarak model" are obvious.

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