

Human rights

the losers in Russia

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The battle for the hearts and minds of Russia's citizens in the run up to this month's presidential elections is not being fought between democratic forces and totalitarian forces, but among three forms of the new totalitarianism: statism, communism and nationalism.

In these arenas there is no room for authentic democratic values. What our state institutions, communists and nationalists call "human rights" bears no relation to the rights of the individual. For them, it merely indicates the political, economic and social interests of select groups. In official parlance, the protection of these interests is the defence of "collective rights" of different segments of the population.

Human rights violations thus remain the most painful problem in Russia today. They are protected by the Constitution; their observation is guaranteed by international agreements to which Russia is a signatory. Yet everywhere they are abused — overtly and crudely. All Russian politicians talk about "human rights". As a slogan, it is featured in the pre-election posters of many political parties. But no one is prepared to defend them.

When a choice arises between political interests and legal principles, political interests inevitably prevail. Legal arguments are used by the authorities and the opposition as a political lever, but neither the law nor human rights presents a serious obstacle to the political imperative of the moment. Human rights remain pure rhetoric, often shrouding blatant arbitrary rule.

For our ruling party under President Boris Yeltsin, the interests of the state represent the highest value. In fact, these are no more than the interests of the ruling "corporations": the caste of high-level civil and military officials in the ruling apparatus, both central and regional.

The development of this caste was masked by democratic rhetoric. Its original function was to redistribute state property and re-establish spheres of economic and political influence, to squeeze out the old Communist *nomenklatura* from key posts.

In regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkiria, Tuva or Chechnya, the level of human rights abuses is notably higher than in Russia as a whole.

Clearly, the "nationalisation" of Russian policy will make no difference to regional abuse, but rather increase its level in the country as a whole. This is a context in which the human rights of individuals simply do not apply.

Any one of these political forces could triumph in Russia. Their victory will mean defeat for political reform and human rights.

Much could be said, and fairly, about the fact that the Russian tradition and mentality is not the most fertile ground for human rights. But any efforts by democrats to surmount this tradition and change the mentality of their fellow citizens have been outrageously paltry.

The defence of human rights has informed neither affairs of state nor education. And this explains not just the political decline of the democrats, but their fragmentation. While debating the details of economic pro-

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grammes or foreign and domestic policy, they have ignored the common humanitarian values they all share. Depressingly, many democrats even see human rights not as the foundation of democracy, but as something secondary that emerges out of economic or political reform.

Should Yeltsin win the June elections, the most important task facing democratic organisations will be to instill in the public mind an awareness of

Having achieved its principal aim, "the corporation" is seeking to keep its spoils. But the rule of law is not always to its advantage in this effort. The corporation's aims are better served by the time-honoured principle of *derzhavnost*: the principle of the state over and above the individual and society.

The concomitant dangers are already apparent. Political reforms have been reversed, authoritarian rule is preferred, policy-making is unpredictable and covert, a nationalist ideology has been formulated. Increasingly, individual rights will be subsumed to "the interests of the people," meaning the interests of the authorities.

On the opposing side stand forces unified by Communist rhetoric. On the basis of evident economic and social miscalculations, this grouping is attracting a significant electorate nostalgic for times when there was no need to answer for anything, when the authorities guaranteed a life that was impoverished, but relatively free of anxiety.

Democratic-sounding slogans notwithstanding, a Communist victory is bound to prompt a wave of *revanchism*, aggressive isolationism, and the destruction of those weak shoots of democracy that have appeared in Russia over the past decade.

State Communism will be even more disastrous for human rights than the policy of the current authorities. The debasement of individuality is intrinsic to the Communist programme.

The third organised force in Russian politics today is nationalism. This plays a supportive role: on the one hand it tacitly feeds state and Communism with a complimentary dose of fascism and xenophobia; on the other, it provides an outlet for social anxiety.

The best example of the way in which ethnic supremacy transforms human rights can be seen in the way the authorities of national republics within the Russian Federation often pay scant attention to civil and political rights, while fiercely defending their national state

for state and society. The second, no less vital task will be the creation of a network of human rights organisations capable of defending citizens' rights and supporting democratic civil associations. To establish a broad spectrum of human rights work is the only way of creating a social basis for democratic political parties, assisting their consolidation and ultimately increasing their electoral success.

In present circumstances, this sort of work has a distinct political significance. It is directed towards the establishment of an alternative political model to the policy of the current authorities and, even more, to the Communist and nationalist models.

This kind of work is exceptionally difficult in any circumstances; under the Communists it may be dangerous. No doubt, the experience gained by dissidents in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s may once again prove useful. Their struggle against Communism had a vital moral influence as the old system collapsed.

Later, in the construction of a new state system, it was harder to make use of the experience of dissent and the involvement of former rights activists in public life was severely circumscribed. Most chose not to return from emigration. Of the dozens of prominent dissidents living in Russia, just a few went into politics.

I am sure that, if the threat of a totalitarian revival arises, many former dissidents will re-emerge. That, I believe, is where my own future lies. I do not know whether we will have the strength or wherewithal to stir public opinion into resistance. But fight we must. Or we will not be worthy of our freedom.

The writer, a close associate of the late Andrei Sakharov, headed Boris Yeltsin's Presidential Commission on Human Rights until his resignation last January.

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